THE HORUS HERESY

James Swallow

FEAR TO TREAD

The angel falls

From the New York Times bestselling author of *Nemesis*

VISIT…

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended. The Age of Darkness has begun.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Primarchs

Sanguinius, Primarch of the Blood Angels
Horus Lupercal, Primarch of the Sons of Horus

The IX Legion 'Blood Angels'

Azkaellon, Sanguinary Guard Commander
Zuriel, Sanguinary Guard Sergeant
Lohgos, Sanguinary Guard
Mendrion, Sanguinary Guard
Halkryn, Sanguinary Guard
Raldoron, Captain, First Company
Orexis, Sergeant, First Company
Mkani Kano, Adjutant, First Company
Cador, First Company
Racine, First Company
Venerable Leonatus, Dreadnought, First Company
Amit, Captain, Fifth Company
Furio, Captain, Ninth Company
Cassiel, Sergeant, Ninth Company
Meros, Apothecary, Ninth Company
Sarga, Ninth Company
Xagan, Ninth Company
Leyteo, Ninth Company
Kaide, Techmarine, Ninth Company
Galan, Captain, 16th Company
Dar Nakir, Captain, 24th Company
Madidus, Sergeant, 24th Company
Gravato, 24th Company
Novenus, 33rd Company
Deon, 57th Company
Cloten, Dreadnought, 88th Company
Tagas, Captain, 111th Company

Alotros, 111th Company
Reznor, Lieutenant-Commander, 164th Company
Ecanus, 202nd Company
Salvator, 269th Company
Dahka Berus, High Warden
Yason Annellus, Warden

The VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

Helik Redknife, Captain
Jonor Stiel, Rune Priest

The Traitor Legions

Erebus, First Chaplain of the Word Bearers
Tanus Kreed, Acolyte of the Word Bearers
Uan Harox, Captain, Eighth Company of the Word Bearers
Maloghurst, Equerry of the Sons of Horus
Fabius, Apothecary Majoris of the Emperor's Children

Imperial Personae

Athene DuCade, Shipmistress of the *Red Tear*
Corocoro Sahzë, Astropath
Halerdyce Gerwyn, Remembrancer
Tillyan Niobe, Gardener

Unknowns

Ka'Bandha
Kyriss

‘War is hell.’

– Wyllam Tekumsah Shirmun, *Recovered Writings of the Age Before Night* [M7]

‘If one wishes to go unseen by devils, one should not place their faith in angels.’

– attributed to the remembrancer Ignace Karkasy [M31]

MELCHIOR

The war that came to Melchior was fought by gods and angels; it cracked sky and earth, burned mountains and turned oceans to ash, but in the end it was all about a single objective. On the white salt plains of the Silver Desert, where millions of conscripts and faithful had toiled to build the praise-towers and empath-chapels, the nephilim gathered for the last fight.

Over the months of the war, they had fallen back, leaving each battleground behind no matter if they had been the victors or the vanquished. It was almost as if the towns, the plainslands and the canyons had been tainted to them by the shedding of blood. The nephilim turned their backs and threaded away, and slowly it became clear where they were heading. From orbit – once their egg-like starcraft had been killed and void superiority lost to them – the lines of displacement were wide enough to be seen with the naked eye. Streams of figures, black ribbons of refugees being herded from each point of the compass, plain against the landscape like the dark plumes of smoke from the burned cities.

The war of the gods and angels could have been ended from that high vantage point. It would have required only the time and patience needed to drive the enemy into their last stronghold and then bombard it into oblivion.

But this was not that kind of battle, nor were those who fought it inclined to stand and wait. There were affronts of great scale that needed to be answered in kind, lessons to be learned and demonstrations to be made to the galaxy at large. The nephilim had offended, and they had to be seen to be punished for their crime.

And then there were the people. Not all of them sang the hymnals, their faces streaked with joyful tears as they looked up at the giants that walked among their number. Not all of them gave everything they had, from chattel to first-born, at the word of the nephilim. Many were among the multitude without choice, shackled and made slaves. They deserved to be freed; to suggest they be sacrificed on the altar of war was unconscionable.

Some said *all* the worshippers were slaves, if one were to widen the definition. In the end, the point was moot. To free the people of Melchior, the nephilim had to be exterminated, down to the very last of them. On that point, there was no disagreement.

In the heart of the Silver Desert, on the sparkling white gypsum wreathed in waves of radiated solar heat, the nephilim gathered with their great entourage among the broken rocks and escarpments, and there they sang their peculiar ululating songs and toiled at the copper frames of their constructions. Waiting for the enemy to come.

Knights in moon-pale armour trimmed with black formed a massive phalanx of ceramite, shields and guns. There were eight thousand of them, the marching of their booted feet crunching the top layer of salted soil into powder, which swirled into the air as fine as paper-smoke. White upon white, wreathed in haze, they seemed to float towards the edges of the great nephilim encampment on a rumble of sound, a peal of thunder that had no ending to it. At the edge of their battalions were war machines – battle tanks, hovering skimmers supported by invisible columns of contra-gravity, low and blocky things that resembled armour-plated trilobites, fighting vehicles that bristled with gun barrels. Peering out above the mist there were hundreds of battle standards and pennants; they carried variant designs of the sigil on the shoulders of the warriors, the black face of a sly canine with a crescent moon beneath its snout, along with unit citations and squadron marks.

The tallest flag, the one that rode at the very tip of the formation, had a unique design – an eye rendered in a manner that resembled sigils of Terra's antiquity, open and daring, watchful like that of

a predator. The pennant was carried by a champion among champions, and he stood resplendent in artificer-wrought armour, marching at the right arm of a demigod. A master of war.

Horus Lupercal, primarch of the Luna Wolves and lord of the XVI Legion Astartes, halted in his tracks and raised a heavy, gauntleted hand, pointing into the lines of barricades and revetments marking the edge of the nephilim host. A ripple broke back across the ranks of his warriors as they too came to a stop and awaited his commands.

The hard, severe light of Melchior's sun cast a fathomless black shadow at his feet. 'You see them, captain?' Horus asked softly, without turning to his subordinate.

Captain Hastur Sejanus, praetor of the Fourth Company of the Luna Wolves, nodded grimly. The near-hit of a nephilim shriekpulse earlier in the campaign had damaged the bones of his skull, and they were knitting together well but the healing process had the side-effect of giving him a constant, low-level headache. The gnawing pain made him irritable and robbed Sejanus of his good humour.

The giants were on the move, surging forwards from their encampment. The captain of the Fourth heard the whistling, tremulous noise of their sing-song voices as they came, and the cries of the men and women who rushed to get out of their way. Massive footfalls drummed across the taut surface of the desert sands.

Horus tipped back his head, looking away, up and up, into the near-cloudless sky. For a moment, the commander seemed uninterested in the enemy approach.

Sejanus glanced around at his lieutenants and made quick gestures in battle-sign, ordering the heavy support and Dreadnought units arranged along the edges of the Luna Wolves formation to make ready. Lascannons, heavy Drako-pattern bolters and magazine-fed missile launchers were prepared. Behind him, the captain heard the sound of eight thousand weapons being armed.

'Here they are,' he said, compelled to say something as the first of the alien giants rose up and stepped over the inner, human-scaled barriers of their bulwark. The nephilim had a kind of unhurried, careful agility that reminded Sejanus of sea-going creatures seen through the walls of a glass tank. They moved through air as if they were swimming in water, deceptively slow. But he had seen first-hand how fast they could go if they wished, darting and spinning, becoming difficult to hit.

Sejanus was ready to give the order there and then, but Horus sensed his intent and shook his head. 'One final chance,' he said. 'We've come this far. We may still be able to save lives.'

And before Sejanus could answer, his liege lord was walking forwards, out of the lines of the ranks towards the closest of the colossal xenos.

It was a grey; Sejanus had absorbed the surveillance data on the aliens via a hypnogogic transfer and he knew what little the intelligence officers of the Imperial Army had gleaned about the command structure of the nephilim. The colours of their bloated, oblate bodies seemed to designate general rank and position. The blue were rank-and-file types, often at the front lines. The green seemed to perform a role similar to that of an Apothecary or perhaps a squad sergeant. The grey were apparently commanders, thought of as 'captains' by the analysts for want of a better word. Attempts to translate the screeching native speech of the aliens had proven fruitless; the upper registers of the sounds existed in hypersonic ranges that were beyond even the reach of a Space Marine's genhanced hearing. That, coupled with the strange light-patterns that flashed over the lines of photophors in their skin, made breaking their tongue a fool's effort.

The nephilim had no trouble doing the reverse, however. They had come to Melchior speaking Imperial Gothic as if they had been born to it. And what they said had denied a whole star system to

the rule of distant Terra, and the Emperor of Mankind.

The grey saw Horus and moved towards him, light-flashes on its epidermis sending a silent command to the lines of greens and blues forming up behind it. They halted, and around their thick, pillar-like legs, Sejanus saw humans clustering to the aliens in the same way that children would cling to a mother. The converts were all armed with weapons looted from Melchior's planetary defence forces. Their faces were faintly visible behind the thick, translucent masks that they wore. The masks blurred their aspects, making their features seem uniform and unfinished; the intelligence corps believed that the conscript masks were made from the epidermal layers of nephilim flesh. Greens had been observed cutting out patches of their own skin for this ritualistic process, and it was theorised that somehow the wearing of the alien flesh bonded the conscripts to their xenos slave-masters. Sejanus had personally observed a post-battle autopsy on a dead nephilim and seen the profusion of wiry innards and gelatinous organs that made up the forms of these things. Hulking entities of roughly humanoid outline, they were smooth like carvings of soapstone, with abstract shapes approximating arms and legs. Their dome heads emerged from their shoulders without a neck, and an array of olfactory slits and eye-spots ringed the surface of their skulls. In this light, the nephilim looked like things of blown glass, their semi-transparent flesh glowing in the bright day.

Horus halted, the grey bending slightly to look down at him. Each of the xenos stood over twice the height of the tallest legionary.

'I will make the offer one last time,' Horus told the creature. 'Release your thralls and leave this place. Do this now, in the Emperor's name.'

The nephilim's photophors glistened and it spread its stubby, three-fingered hands in a gesture of false openness that it must have copied from a human. The air in front of the alien vibrated as an invisible pane of force rippled into being. Strange harmonics whistled and hummed; this was how the xenos spoke, creating an external, ethereal tympanic membrane, manipulating the passage of air molecules through some as-yet-undetermined means. It wasn't psychic in nature – that had been ascertained already – but technological. Some kind of instrumentality bonded into their organic forms.

'Why do you oppose us?' it asked. 'The need does not exist. We want peace.'

Horus placed one hand on the pommel of the sword at his waist. 'That is a falsehood. You came here unbidden, and you took a name from the ancient mythology – that of Terra, Caliban and Barac.'

'Nephilim,' it sang, its voice high and peculiar, sounding out each syllable of the word. 'The fallen seraphs.' The grey took a heavy step closer to the primarch, and Sejanus's hand reflexively tightened around the grip of his storm bolter. 'Worship them. Praise us. Find peace.'

'Find peace.' The humans huddling at the feet of the aliens echoed the words as if they were a benediction.

Horus's attention never once strayed from the alien. 'You are parasites,' he said, his words carrying on the wind across the plains, breaking the silence that followed. 'We know how you draw your sustenance. You feed on the emanations of life. Our Imperial psykers have seen it. You need to be adored… to be worshipped like gods.'

'That…' it said, the sound-voice humming, 'that is a kind of peace.'

'And with your technology you control minds and cage spirit. Human minds. Human spirits.' Horus shook his head. 'That cannot stand.'

'You cannot stop us.' The grey gestured towards the acres of copper towers and strange antennae behind it. There were thousands of the nephilim now, a sea of giants moving forwards in slow, loping

steps. ‘We have fought you, we know your way. And you can only win if you kill those you profess to protect.’ It pointed at a group of converts. The alien made the hand-gesture again, trains of white light moving under its skin. ‘Join us. We will show you, you will understand how beautiful it is to be… in communion. To be at once a god and a mortal.’

For a moment, Sejanus thought he saw something dark pass over Horus’s face; then the instant was gone. ‘We have dethroned all the gods,’ said the primarch, ‘and you are only pale shadows of those false things.’

The grey let off a hooting cry in its own language and the legion of nephilim advanced, each of them phosphorescing an angry yellow. ‘We will destroy you,’ it said. ‘We outnumber you.’

Horus gave a rueful nod and drew his sword, a massive blade of oiled steel and adamantium. ‘You will try,’ he said. ‘But today you face the Emperor’s sons and his warriors. We are the Luna Wolves, and this Legion is the anvil upon which you will be broken.’

From high overhead there was a low crackle and a sound like distant thunder as sonic booms from the upper atmosphere reached the desert floor. Sejanus looked up, his acute eyesight picking out lines of white contrails, hundreds in number, flaring out behind great crimson tears and scarlet-hued hawks as they fell at supersonic speeds towards the silver sands.

‘We are the anvil,’ Horus repeated, pointing with his sword. ‘Now behold the hammer.’

The heavens screamed.

Ejected from the launch tubes of a dozen capital ships and battle-barges in low orbit, a rain of ceramite capsules tore through the outer atmosphere of Melchior and fell like flaming meteors towards the Silver Desert. Falling with them were diving hawks: Stormbirds and assault gunships turning and wheeling through the air towards the gargantuan nephilim encampment.

They were red as blood, red as fury, and they carried company upon company of the warriors of the IX Legion Astartes. The speed of their assault was the key to victory; the alien invaders and their zealots had successfully been drawn out to confront the massed forces of the Luna Wolves, leaving the defences on their flanks thinned and permeable. But the xenos giants were not slow in their thinking, and the moment they understood that they had been duped, they would attempt to regroup and fortify.

The Blood Angels would not allow that to happen. The nephilim would be broken and cut down, their cohesion shattered by the brutal deep strike that even now was moments from point of impact.

The first skirling impulse of sonic power shot up past the descending assault force, energetic beams of oscillating air sparking spontaneous flashes of heat-lightning. Down in the desert, the quickest of the aliens were reaching their thick arms upwards as if groping for the high clouds, using the resonance of their glassy skeletons as waveguides for the shriek-attacks.

Drop-pods clipped by the sound beams went off course, spiralling out of the landing quadrant towards the white salt erg; others not so fortunate ripped open or slammed into brutal collision with their fellows. The lead Stormbird, crimson like its cohorts but adorned with wings of gold, wove a course through the sonic barrage, guiding the flock into a blazing power-dive.

Heavy lasers and missile pods about its nose and wings spat fire back towards the nephilim defenders, blasting black craters in the hard-packed sand. They were closing with each passing second, but were still too high for accurate targeting; instead, the Stormbird’s gunnery crews were suppressing the enemy far below, forcing them to open up the space where the warriors would make planetfall.

And when the point of no return was crossed, the red and gold aircraft turned into a tight, descending spiral. Across the ventral hull, plates of metal unlocked and slid back along hydraulic piston-rails, allowing the howling air into the open compartment revealed behind them. Other aircraft in the formation did the same, hatches releasing to bare their interiors to the sky.

From the lead Stormbird came a figure clad in armour the shade of the sun. A primarch, another demigod.

An angel.

He threw himself into the pale sky, embracing the pull of gravity like a lover, letting it speed him towards terminal velocity. Unmasked, his gallant face set in determination, a mane of flashing tresses snapping in the wind, he cried out his defiance.

From his back there was an explosion of white as snowy pinions unfurled, great wings extending out in wide arcs to catch the flow of the air and effortlessly harness it. Gold trinkets, teardrops of precious red jade and ruby, silk tabards and chainmail of platinum ratt-led against a suit of ceramite and plasteel so ornate, so glorious that its artistry seemed better suited to a gallery of the highest reckoning. Against the drag of the airflow, he unsheathed a wicked red sword with a curved, barbed hilt; it was the cousin to the blade held by his brother Horus far below.

With him were warriors no less determined, no less fierce in countenance. Assault legionaries of a dozen companies bore down with the snarling jets of jump-packs upon their backs, guns in their hands and retribution hard in their eyes. Leading them were the Sanguinary Guard, whose golden armour and white wings echoed those of their liege lord; but the wings that held the Guard aloft were made of enamelled metal, and like the assault squads their flight was powered by spears of orange flames from blazing fusion motors.

The primarch landed with an impact greater than a point-blank barrage from a Vindicator, a perfectly circular ripple of shock resonating out from the crash of his boots upon the desert sands. Nephilim blues rushing to attack were blasted off their feet and they struggled to right themselves, only to be gunned down by the ornate wrist-bolters of the falling Sanguinary Guard and the fusillade of the assault squads.

The angel Sanguinius drew up from the crater his arrival had shaped and met his first foe. A bellowing nephilim green came hurtling at him, shouting pulses of sonic disruption powerful enough to shatter bone and break rock; the alien towered over the primarch, and its lucent flesh was alight with violent, flickering speech-colour. There was a crackling cadence as it ran, the outer dermal layer of skin hardening into a natural sheath of misted, glassy armour.

His sword-tip rose up in a bright arc of glittering metal and met the nephilim in the centre of its torso mass. The blade bit into the glass-skin and shattered it effortlessly, fragments pealing with tinny bell-tones as they ricocheted off the primarch's battle plate. The weapon went on, deep and true, the monomolecular edge slicing through into gelatinous internals, breaking silicon bones and opening up the alien to the air. Bifurcated, the green-skinned creature came apart with a death-howl that ripped into the dust as it collapsed.

Sanguinius shook silvery, metallic blood off his blade and threw a nod to his honour host. Each of them looked back at him with the mirror of the primarch's own aspect, their helmets sculpted into a noble ideal of his face. 'First blood, Azkaellon,' he said, addressing his words to the Commander of the Guard.

‘It is fitting, my lord,’ said the warrior, tense with the rush of imminent war.

Sanguinius nodded once. ‘My sons know their mission. Strike hard and strike fast.’

Azkaellon saluted, removing his helm to present the hard lines of his face to his master. ‘Your will.’ As he spoke, the rumble of the remainder of the landing Stormbirds was joined by the crashing impacts of the drop-pods. The ground quaking beneath them, the ceramite teardrops slammed into the sand and split open like the blossoming of lethal flowers. Line warriors emerged from each pod in combat-ready formations, alongside Librarians, black-armoured Wardens and battle Apothecaries. Azkaellon saw them all look to Sanguinius for their lead; like them, he was proud to be here, in the company of his progenitor and primarch. ‘No xenos will be spared,’ he promised.

Sanguinius raised his sword in a return salute. ‘The others…’ The angel didn’t say the words, but the Guard Commander knew who he meant. *The slaves*. ‘Liberate as many as you can. They’ll fight with us now they know they have not been forsaken.’

‘And the conscripts?’ Azkaellon pointed towards a rough skirmish line of the masked human worshippers as they advanced warily towards the red-armoured legionaries. ‘If they oppose us?’

A moment of sorrow passed over the great angel’s aspect, dimming his radiance for an instant. ‘Then they too will be set free.’ Sanguinius held up his blade and the gesture brought a roar from his assembled sons that beat at the sky.

A cohort of lumbering blues crested a low ridge and the battle began in earnest for the Blood Angels.

At the start, it had been Horus who called the tune of the battle plans. In the strategium of his flagship, the *Vengeful Spirit*, the master of the Luna Wolves faced his brother across a wide hololithic display and showed him the plan he had conceived to break the will of the nephilim. It was shock and awe, an implacable and showy display of combat might, the kind that Sanguinius’s sibling had made his own time and again throughout the wars of the Great Crusade. In a sea of red and white, Horus wanted the Blood Angels to march shoulder-to-shoulder with their cousins, cowing the aliens with the sight of an army of thousands rolling without pause to the gates of their last bastion. And then through those gates, over the battlements, not stopping, not pausing to parley or hesitate. *Like the ocean these things sprang from*, Horus had said, *we will roll over the aliens, drag them down and drown them.*

The sheer bombast of the plan was its greatest strength, but Sanguinius had not been easily swayed to it. Across the hololith, the two brothers had argued and countered, to and fro, one presenting obstacles and challenges to the other. To an outside observer, it might have seemed aloof, almost callous to see these two mighty genhanced soldiers talking over a monumental confrontation as if it were little more than a game of regicide.

But nothing could be further from the truth. The Blood Angel looked into the panes of the holograph and saw the countless icons representing civilian concentrations, the play of the geography, the deceptive desert landscape full of hidden chokepoints and kill-boxes. In his mind, Horus had already weighed the tactics of the engagement and made a regrettable, but necessary choice. He had made the difficult decision and then moved past it, ridden on. Not from heartlessness, but from expedience.

Sanguinius could not do so as easily. The blunt, brute-force approach was better suited to their more intemperate kinsmen, to Russ or to Angron, and neither Sanguinius nor his brother Horus were so artless, so focused upon the target to the detriment of all else.

But it was difficult not to allow the cold rage instilled by the actions of the nephilim to be given its

rein. The alien giants, mocking humanity's great dream with their talk of peace and unity, had left a trail of destruction behind them that had claimed a hundred worlds before they had come to rest upon Melchior.

Sagan, the DeCora Spine, Orpheo Minoris, Beta Rigel II. These planets had been denuded of all human life, populations herded into empath-chapels as big as mountains and then slowly *consumed*. The true horror of it was that the nephilim used those they preyed upon to do their soldiering for them, snaring the pliant, the lonely, the sorrowful with their ideal of an attainable godhood. They plied them with stories of eternal existence for the faithful, of endless sorrow for the agnostic; and they were very good at it.

Perhaps the xenos really believed that what they were doing was somehow taking them closer to a form beyond flesh, to an afterlife in an eternal heaven-state; it did not matter. With their technologies they implanted bits of themselves into their thralls to further their communion, they cut their own flesh and made the masks to mark their devotees. The nephilim controlled minds, either through the transmitted power of their will or through the weak character of those they chose.

They were an affront to the Emperor's secular galaxy, not only an offence to the purity of a human ideal but in their insidious cuckoo-nest displacement of those who foolishly gave them fealty.

For what the aliens fed upon, what the scouts of the Blood Angels and Luna Wolves had seen and reported back, were the very lives of those who cherished them. The empty chapels were piled high with stacks of desiccated corpses, bodies aged years in hours as all living essence was siphoned from them. It had sickened the primarchs as the true understanding of the enemy they faced was, at last, revealed.

The nephilim fed on *adulation*.

Thus, Sanguinius would deny these repellent xenos their sustenance and defeat their arrogance in the same blow. The invaders believed that the Emperor's sons would never starve them by resorting to the murder of the humans they took as their cattle, and that was so. Yet what the nephilim considered a weakness, the Angel made a strength. So confident were they of their unassailable position, they had met Horus's arrival with almost the full might of their forces, daring the Luna Wolves to strike at them.

And with the aliens turning their backs, their belief in their victory already blinding them to the unbreakable strength of intent within the warriors they now faced, the true angels fell in fire on Melchior and became the hammer of the Emperor's wrath.

Running at a charge, the primarch was a hurricane, racing into the thick of the nephilim lines and taking to the air in deft, agile moves. With his sword and the shorter blades of a glaive built into his vambrace he made kill after kill, shouting down those who tried to deafen him with their dirge-waves. Flanking him, Azkaellon and Zuriel, first and second of his personal guard, used their wrist-mounted Angelus bolters to pour cascades of fire into the enemy line. With each hit, the warheads of the mass-reactive bloodshard rounds exploded into hundreds of magno-charged monofilaments; every concussive impact upon the skin of a nephilim caused bloody detonations inside the torsos of the alien creatures. Lakes of bluish, shimmering internal fluids littered the battleground, shrinking slowly as the silver sand absorbed them.

At the heels of the Guard came the captains leading their assault companies. Raldoron, the Blooded of the First, hurled bolter fire from the weapon in his steady hand, his elite veterans emblazoned with

ebon fetishes carved in the fashion of the hunter tribes on the Blood Angels home world of Baal. The First Captain was joined by elements of Furio's Ninth Company shield-bearers, Galan's men of the 16th with their favoured blade-staves, and Amit with the Fifth, every one of them bearing boltgun and flaying knife.

Heavy weapon barrages concentrated on the copper towers and the walls of the empath-chapels, denying the nephilim the infrastructure of their haven, forcing them to engage head-on. To the south, where Horus had drawn his feint, the great tide of battle was shifting and breaking. The Luna Wolves had first dug in, block-ading any progress or escape by the xenos, and now they advanced. Extending into a wide arc, the line of Horus's soldiery forced the varicoloured giants back, pressing them on to the blades and the guns of the Blood Angels. With brutal inevitability, the trap the Emperor's sons had devised aboard the *Vengeful Spirit* closed like a vice. With each passing minute, they left the aliens less and less room to manoeuvre. Many of the nephilim's converts began to surrender, droves of them crying out in pain as they tried to peel off the bonded masks; while those too far along the road to worship spent their lives for their masters in a vain and fruitless attempt to slow the pace of the Space Marines.

Sanguinius had no pity for these dupes. They had allowed themselves to be drawn in by pretty words, let themselves be ruled by their fears instead of by their hopes. And in much greater measure, he had only anger for the nephilim themselves.

Over the bodies of the alien dead, the crimson legionaries and their golden warlord turned fury upon the giants. The whickering music of the aliens' strange songs became an atonal scale of panicked noises punctuated by chugging snarls of aggression. Horus's landspeeder squadrons raced overhead, bracketing a phalanx of blue-skins with salvoes from their graviton guns and multi-meltas, punching through curls of smoke as the outer rings of the encampment burned.

Galan's war-cry drew the primarch's attention and he spared the captain a glance. There was such ferocity, such resolve in the face of the warrior, and Sanguinius felt a surge of pride to be fighting alongside his sons. Legionaries born of Baal and Terra alike, united many years earlier by the Angel himself under a banner of incarnadine, these were his sharpest blades, his brightest minds. In battle they were unparalleled, and for a moment the primarch allowed himself to feel the pure, wild joy of the fight. They were going to win; that had never been in doubt.

The enemy was in disarray, and their villainy was unquestioned. This was a righteous battle, the victory of the Imperium as inevitable as the rising of Melchior's sun. Sanguinius and Horus would win this day, and a lost world would be brought back into the fold once more. This would be done, by battle-brothers and brothers in blood, by primarch and legionary alike. He could taste the victory on his lips, sweet and dark like good wine.

And so there, on Melchior's shining sands, the nephilim were put to the sword.

In the aftermath, the freed slaves were isolated from the converts who still remained alive for fear that revenge killings would explode from a mob mentality. Horus took on this deed, in no uncertain terms drilling those who claimed to lead the liberated that justice would be delivered to all turncoats – but it would be Imperial justice, right and true and conducted to the letter of the law.

In the meantime, the convert prisoners were given back-breaking menial work, overseen by troopers from the Imperial Army brigades that had come to support the Legions. The converts carried the dead nephilim to great pyres set about the desert and were made to burn the corpses of the aliens

they had worshipped; others were formed into work gangs whose task was to dismantle the copper devotional towers they had forced their fellows to build only days earlier.

Sanguinius stood atop a shallow hill of pale rock and watched the sun dropping towards the distant horizon. His wings were pulled close, and the xenos blood shed upon him as he fought was gone, cleansed from his armour. He nodded to himself. Melchior was safe, the victory secure. Already his thoughts were moving towards the next battle, the next world in need of illumination.

A smile grew on his lips as he sensed his brother's approach, but he did not turn to look at Horus. 'There is a question that concerns me greatly,' said Sanguinius, with false gravity.

'Oh?' The lord of the Luna Wolves halted at his side. 'That sounds troubling.'

Neither of them paid heed to it, but directly below in the shallow canyon beneath the rise, many of the common soldiers, prisoners, even their own legionaries, paused to watch. It was a sight to see a single primarch in the flesh; to behold a *pair* of these gene-forged transhumans at once was something that many of those watching would remember for as long as they lived. For many different reasons.

'How can I ease your disquiet, brother?' Horus went on, affecting a serious mien.

The Angel eyed him. 'If the grey had done as you asked, if it had set the thralls free… Tell me, would you really have let the aliens go?'

Horus nodded, as if the answer were obvious. 'I am a man of my word. I would have let them leave the planet's surface, make for orbit…' He cocked his head. 'But when they met *your* ships up there, well…' He gave a small shrug, the huge shoulders of his battle plate exaggerating the motion. 'You've never been as agreeable as I.'

The smile became a moment of laughter. Sanguinius gave a slight, mocking bow. 'So true. I must content myself with merely being the better warrior.'

'Don't make me pluck those wings,' Horus retorted.

'Perish the thought!' said Sanguinius. 'Without them I'd only be as handsome as you are.'

'That *would* be tragic,' Horus agreed.

The moment of levity passed and in the next exchange they had gone from the easy humour of a pair of siblings to the manner of two allied generals. 'What ships have you chosen to remain to administrate the compliance?'

Horus rubbed his chin. 'The *Sword Argus* and the *Crimson Spectre*, I think. Their Army platoons can garrison here, make sure the nephilim cult is dead and buried. If all goes well, they will disengage and reconnect with my expeditionary fleet in a few months.'

The winged primarch glanced up into the sky. 'I fear we have not seen the last of these creatures.'

'The Khan hunts their birth world even as we speak. He will finish what we started here today.'

'I hope so. The technology the aliens used, the ease with which they infiltrated the minds of these civilians... It's troubling. We can't allow it to go unchecked.' Sanguinius looked back at his sibling. 'So, where next for you?'

'The Ullanor Sector. A dozen systems have gone silent, from New Mitama all the way out to Nalkari. I suspect another xenos incursion.'

'Orks?'

'Likely. I could use your support, brother.'

Sanguinius smiled again. 'I doubt that. And I could not oblige even if I wished it. My astropaths have been agitated for days, divining messages from our scouts in the Perseus Null. Compliance is sorely needed there, I have been told.'

‘Father’s great plan… It does not often allow us the chance to cross paths,’ noted Horus. His brother thought he sensed a thread of regret beneath the words. ‘How much glory did we share this day? Not enough.’

‘Agreed.’ There had been a moment when the primarchs had met during the engagement, when a horde of nephilim grey-skins had rushed at them with ear-splitting barrages of noise radiating from the glass spines growing out of their limbs. The brothers stood back to back and weathered every blow, cut down each attacker. The moment had been the fulcrum around which their victory had turned. ‘I confess I would relish the opportunity to share the battleground with you again,’ Sanguinius went on. ‘And not just that. I miss our conversations.’

Horus’s frown deepened. ‘One day we will be done with all this.’ He gestured at the desert sands and the debris of the battle. ‘Then we can talk and play regicide to our hearts’ content. At least until the next crusade.’

Something in his brother’s tone gave Sanguinius pause. There was a meaning buried in there, a moment that he could sense but not grasp; something that perhaps even Horus himself was unaware of.

The chance to examine the thought was lost when a figure in crimson armour came running up the low hill. ‘My lords. Forgive the interruption.’ Raldoron bowed and shot Horus a wary look before turning to his primarch. ‘The Angel’s presence is required… elsewhere.’

‘Is there a problem, First Captain?’ Horus asked the Blood Angels officer.

Raldoron’s expression was unreadable. The warrior had a gaunt, solid face beneath a high queue of grey-white hair, and he betrayed nothing. ‘A Legion matter, sir,’ he said. ‘It requires my lord’s personal attention.’

Sanguinius fixed his captain with a hard stare. He was one of his most trusted men and carried many honours alongside his stewardship of the elite veteran company, hard-won through decades of war in the Emperor’s name. Raldoron was equerry to the primarch and held the new honorific ‘Chapter Master’, serving in a similar role to the warriors of Horus’s advisory cadre, the Mournival. He was not a man given to impulsive and ill-considered actions, so his intrusion here was cause for concern. ‘Speak, Ral.’

There was momentary pause, so tiny, so fractional that only someone who knew Captain Raldoron as well as his liege lord did would pick up on it. But it was enough to signal that something was amiss.

‘One of our brothers has been… *lost*, sir.’

Sanguinius felt his face become a mask, as cold seeped into his veins. ‘My brother, please excuse me.’

He never registered Horus’s reply; he was already moving, following Raldoron out through the mist of battle-smoke wreathing the darkening desert.

They did not speak, not as they walked, not as they boarded the land speeder that Raldoron had secured for the transit across the warzone. Sanguinius retreated inside his own thoughts and prepared himself for the worst as the First Captain piloted the flyer out across the eastern flank of the conflict area. They moved in the nap of the earth, rolling up and down shallow inclines, skirting the remains of blasted praise-towers and fallen battlements. As the grav motors slowed and they neared their destination, the primarch saw that the matter had been contained exactly as he had wished it to be. Raldoron, ever the planner, had made sure that a wide circular area was secure, a barrier of Blood

Angels legionaries standing face-outwards in a wide combat wheel hundreds of metres across. None of them looked up as the speeder passed over their heads and dropped down to settle in the courtyard of a bombed-out empath-chapel.

'In there.' Raldoron's grim words carried over the low hum of the idling engines as he jutted his chin towards the ruin. 'I isolated him the moment I was certain.'

Sanguinius felt the cold in his blood spread to his hands as they walked towards the slumped shape of the building. The walls had listed to the right and the ceiling had come down, forcing the oval church to sink into the sands beneath. A second, smaller group of legionaries stood around the black maw of the entrance; they were from Raldoron's honour guard, and they also did not face the site they were guarding nor react to the presence of their primarch.

'His name?'

'Alotros,' said Raldoron. 'A battle-brother of solid, if unremarkable service. From Captain Tagas's command, the 111th Company.'

'What does Tagas know?' asked Sanguinius.

'That Brother Alotros is dead, my lord.' A figure in gold armour emerged from the dark doorway and saluted. Azkaellon's severe expression spoke volumes as to what had gone on. 'Killed by the xenos, atomised in an explosion. A noble end.' The Sanguinary Guard deliberately stepped into the path of his commander and halted, glaring at Raldoron. 'You should not have brought him here.'

Raldoron opened his mouth to speak, but his primarch talked over him. 'That is not your place to decide, Guard Commander.' Azkaellon paled slightly at the force behind Sanguinius's hard, even tone. 'Now step aside.'

Azkaellon did as he was told, but he could not remain silent. 'This should be dealt with by us, sir. Quietly.'

'Quietly?' echoed the primarch, his voice suddenly distant. 'No, my son. No Blood Angel will ever die in silence.'

Inside the fallen alien temple, the stink of fresh blood hung in the air, powerful and metallic. Sanguinius licked his lips; he couldn't stop the reflex reaction. His omophageaic membrane tasted several different varieties of human vitae, analysing them as instinctively as a vintner would know the ages and textures of a wine's bouquet. There was alien blood spilled here too, the acrid tang of the nephilim among it all.

He found the golden boots of his warplate casting ripples out across a pool of dark fluid that had formed a small lake in the gloomy interior of the chapel. There were many, many dead in here with him, arranged around the edges of the chamber as if they were an audience watching the stage of a theatre in the round. Smashed fragments of nephilim neuro-tech – synapse sinks, empathic matrices and the like – littered the ruin. But none of the violence wrought here had come from the battle fought through this day. No, the scene here was not one of war, but of madness.

He saw Alotros the moment he entered the temple, the thermal form of him clear to the primarch's bio-augmented vision against the cold bodies of the dead. The Space Marine was crouched down on one knee as if in a gesture of fealty. With careful, steady actions, Alotros sat in the middle of the lake and mechanically cupped handfuls of the dark fluid, one after another, to his lips. He drank silently, unhurried.

'Look at me,' ordered Sanguinius. His heart tightened in his chest and a very specific kind of sorrow gripped him as Alotros slowly obeyed.

The Blood Angel's armour was badly damaged; fibre-bundle musculature ripped, ceramite cracked. It appeared that the chestplate had been torn open across the sternum and a brutal wound opened beneath it. The primarch recognised the hit pattern of a nephilim shriekpulse, and looking closer he saw the trails of dried blood visible from Alotros's nostrils, his ears, the corners of his reddened eyes. Such a hit would have boiled the brain matter of an ordinary human, and even for a legionary the impact should have crippled flesh and torn at neural pathways. Alotros was pallid and in obvious pain, but he seemed detached from it. The warrior had taken a point-blank strike from one of the alien weapons and survived, a rare happenstance; but, Sanguinius corrected himself, he had *not* survived. Not really. At this very moment, somewhere else on the battlefield, Captain Tagas and the men who had been Alotros's squadmates were making their peace with his death.

His lips, his chin, the exposed flesh of his neck, all were wet with the blood he had been patiently drinking, mouthful by mouthful. Alotros looked at his primarch with bleak, animal eyes. Sanguinius saw a hunger there, the same hunger he had seen before in other eyes, in other places. At first only rarely, but now with a grim regularity.

Alotros released a deep, rumbling growl and slowly came to his feet. His hands tightened into talons and he showed his teeth. Fangs flashed in the gloom. In another time it would have been said that his soul had been usurped by some hellish phantom, that his blood was poisoned, that he was *possessed*. But such ideas were fantasies. The warping of this good warrior came from something within him, not from a mythical, otherworldly external force.

Sanguinius knew that it was already too late, but he could not go on without trying. He offered his hand. 'My son,' he began. 'Step back, if you can. Step back from the abyss and return to us. I will save you.'

Alotros blinked, as if the words were foreign to him and their meaning difficult to grasp.

'This is my fault,' said the primarch. 'I am to blame. But I will amend this, if you help me.' He took a step forwards. 'Will you help me, Alotros?'

It was with a father's hollow regret that Sanguinius saw his words fall upon stony ground. A feral intent, an impulse drawn up from the very deepest bestial core of the warrior, emerged on the Blood Angel's face, and finally whatever was left of Brother Alotros of the 111th Company simply *went away*.

In a berserk, furious rage that exploded out of nothing, the legionary tore across the empath-chapel in great splashing bounds. The primarch hesitated; with power sword, glaive-blade or infernus pistol, it would have been no matter for him to draw a weapon and end the battle-brother's life before he came within arm's reach. But something stopped him.

Perhaps it was hope, hope that Alotros would be the one to break the cycle and not do the same as those before; or perhaps it was guilt that stayed his hand, some measure of punishment inflicted on the self to see this horror up close, to know the dying moment of it.

Against all reason, against all possibility of survival, Alotros attacked his gene-father. He was screaming, babbling in fragments of the technomad dialect of Baal's Low Mesa clans. The warrior wanted only one thing: to bite deep into living flesh and drink his fill of the rich crimson fluid within. He was truly lost.

Sanguinius held Alotros at bay, the warrior's maddened blows ringing harmlessly off his battle armour, the fires of his rage not fading but burning brighter with every passing moment. The cocktail of blood-fumes on his breath clogged the primarch's senses, and Sanguinius *understood*.

He knew where this crimson fury, this *red thirst* sprang from. He could sense it, coiled like a poisonous thread inside his own genetic helix. A dark bequest that he had passed on to his kin. A recessive death-mark.

'I am sorry, my son,' he told Alotros, in the last heartbeat before he broke the legionary's neck.

Alotros's snarls ended with a guttural hiss, and at the end there was some brief measure of peace in his eyes. His body fell into the shallow pool; the Blood Angel's pain was at an end, a final mercy granted to him. But now the darkness in the gloomy alien church seemed shades deeper, heavy with the weight of what had been done there.

For the second time that day, Sanguinius sensed the presence of his brother.

He wheeled, turning to glare into the dimness as a massive shadow broke away from a slumped support column and stood stock-still before him. 'Horus...?'

'What did you do?' His brother's face caught the light and the ghost of shock was etched upon it. '*What did you do*?' The sound of his own voice seemed to jolt the other primarch out of his stasis and he rushed towards the fallen warrior. 'You… killed him.'

In a strangely protective gesture, Sanguinius stepped in front of the corpse, bringing Horus up short. 'You followed me?' His tone betrayed anger and surprise, shame and regret and a hundred other emotions. 'Spied on me?'

It was taking all of Horus's monumental self-control to stay where he stood, the confusion on his face shifting, changing. He was grasping to comprehend what he had just witnessed, and failing. *A primarch executing one of his own sons…* The thought of such a thing was terrible to contemplate.

'You should not be here,' Sanguinius told him, echoing Azkaellon's reproach. 'This was not for the eyes of outsiders.' His words were dead, bled dry.

'That seems so.' Horus gave a glum nod. 'But I am your brother. I am not an outsider.' He raised his head and met the Angel's gaze, challenging him. 'And I do not understand why you have committed such a hateful deed.'

Sanguinius did not bother to ask how Horus had made it past Raldoron's guards without raising any alarm; he was a primarch, after all, and the Emperor's sons had always been adept at going where their will took them.

When Horus looked at him, it was not with anger and disappointment, but with a terrible kind of empathy. 'I should not have come here, but your reaction when the First Captain spoke… Brother, what I saw in your eyes at that moment gave me cause for concern.' He stepped around and knelt over Alotros's body. 'And now I see I was right to think so.' Horus studied the dead legionary with a clinical eye, and raised his gauntlet to tap a finger upon his temple. 'Tell me there was cause. What was wrong with him? Did the nephilim do this, did they cause some great damage to his mind?'

The lie caught in the Angel's throat. Yes, he could say –

A terrible tragedy. This is the work of the foul xenos. I was forced to take a regrettable action–

'No.' The falsehood crumbled before it was fully formed. He could no more lie to his sibling than he could chain Melchior's sun and pull it from the sky. Horus and Sanguinius knew each other so well that to lie to one another would be a monumental undertaking, a pretence of ultimate artifice. He could not conscience such a thing. 'No, Horus. This is my fault. The blame lies with me.'

For a long moment, there was only silence between them, and the Angel could see his brother's train of thought there in his expression, the questions he was asking himself, the answers he found wanting.

At last, Horus stood and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, the stony lines of his face etched in disquiet. 'If you wish it, I will leave this place now and never speak again of the matter. Your Legion is your concern, Sanguinius, and I would never question that.' He paused. 'But I am your brother and your friend, and it cuts me to see the sorrow in your eyes. I know you are a compassionate soul, that you would not do such a thing unless it was your only choice. But you have a great burden, and I would help you carry it, if only you will let me.'

The Blood Angel's eyes narrowed. 'You ask much.'

'I always do,' admitted Horus. 'Speak to me. Make me understand.' He was almost imploring. 'I swear to you, on the honour of my Legion, any words spoken here will never pass beyond these walls. I will keep your confidence from all.'

Sanguinius met his gaze. 'Even from our father?'

The other primarch said nothing for a moment; then at last, he nodded.

With great care, Sanguinius gathered up the body of his fallen warrior and carried him from the pool of shimmering dark to a stone pedestal. The platform had been home to a crystalline devotional statue of a nephilim, but now all that remained of it was a shallow drift of broken shards that crunched underfoot. The primarch arranged the body of the dead legionary in repose, restoring the dignity that his madness had stolen.

At length, Sanguinius turned to face Horus. 'We were made to be perfect,' he began. 'Tools of war. The supreme princes of battle.' He slowly spread his hands and the white wings curled at his back. 'Do you think that father succeeded in his design?'

'Perfection is not a state of being,' Horus replied. 'It is a state of striving. The journey is all that has meaning, not the goal.'

'Did the Phoenician tell you that?'

His brother nodded once. 'Fulgrim may be a peacock, but when he spoke those words he was right.'

Sanguinius laid a hand on Alotros's stilled chest. 'We give so much to our sons. Our aspect, our will, our fortitude. They are the best of us. But they carry our flaws as well.'

'So they should,' said Horus. 'So *we* should. To be human is to be flawed – no matter what we are or where we came from, we *are* still human. We share the same ancestry as the people we defend.'

'Indeed. If we lost that connection… If we truly were beyond humanity, then the Emperor's sons and the Legiones Astartes would have more kinship to xenos like them–' Sanguinius gestured towards the corpse of a nephilim blue-skin '–than to the children of Terra.' He shook his head. 'But for all that we are, we cannot escape what is within.' The Angel pressed his fingers to his chest. 'I have bequeathed something dark to my sons, brother.'

'Speak plainly,' Horus demanded. 'I am not Russ who would judge you, or Dorn who would not listen. You and I, we have no need for pretence.'

'I believe that there is a hidden flaw in the genetic matrix of the Blood Angels gene-seed. Something in my own bio-type. I have looked within myself and seen glimpses of it, brother. A murky core, a trait that lies buried and waits to be awakened.'

Horus's gaze fell on the dead warrior. 'This is… the fury that I saw in him?'

'It cries out for blood. And there is never enough.'

The Luna Wolf turned away, thinking. 'How many times?'

'Alotros is one of several that I am certain of. There may have been others who perished in battle

without note of it.'

'A handful, in two hundred years, from a Legion of one hundred and twenty thousand?' Horus folded his armoured gauntlets together. 'How can you be sure of–'

Sanguinius held up his hand. 'I am sure,' he said gravely. 'And the incidences are coming closer together. I fear that, in time, it will grow to encompass every one of my sons. In my meditation, I have seen such… *possibilities*.'

His brother waited for him to continue. Each of the primarchs were touched by their father's preternatural gifts in a different way, and for Sanguinius, part of that legacy was a certain kind of *sight*. A hazy, indefinite sense of foreknowledge.

'The story is always the same,' he went on. 'A warrior in the throes of battle succumbs to a rage that builds and builds until his reason is lost. His humanity is stripped away until only a feral core remains. He kills and kills, seeks blood and more blood.' He paled as he spoke. 'And at the end, at the very worst of it, he loses every last piece of himself.'

'Until death is a kindness.' Horus nodded again. 'Brother… I understand now. How long have you known?'

Strangely, as Sanguinius had given voice to the words he felt the load upon him lighten, as if the act of confiding in Horus had indeed lessened his burden. 'I have kept this from our father and brothers for several years. I am searching for a solution. Some among my sons have a measure of the truth. They are united with me in finding a way of undoing this flaw.' His jaw stiffened. '*My* flaw.'

'Brother…' Horus began, framing his words.

Sanguinius shook his head. 'Don't say it. You think that I blame myself for something I have no control over, but I do not agree. This is my legacy and I must account for it. A primarch…' He faltered over the words, his voice thick with emotion.

'A primarch is father to his Legion,' said Horus, completing the thought for him. 'I will not disagree or try to convince you otherwise.' He paused again. 'Who else is aware of the full dimensions of this?' Horus glanced towards the entrance of the fallen empath-chapel.

'Azkaellon, Captain Raldoron, my Master Apothecary on Baal… and a few others.'

When Horus spoke again, his voice was low. 'Why in Terra's name did you not ask for help?'

Sanguinius met his gaze. 'Tell me, Horus. What is it that you are most afraid of?'

The demand took the other primarch off-guard, and for a moment, the Luna Wolf was on the verge of dismissing the question; then his expression shifted and he gave the brutally truthful answer. 'Falling short. Of failing my Legion, my Imperium… my Emperor.'

'Something each of his sons shares, even if many of us would never have the courage to admit it.' Sanguinius walked away, the shadows lengthening around him. 'I could not speak of this to any of the others. You know as well as I do that it would diminish my Legion. Some of our brothers would see it as weakness and seek to turn this truth against me.' He grimaced. 'Alpharius, Lorgar… They would not be generous.'

'But why have you kept this from father? If any living being could know the key to it, it would be him!'

Sanguinius rounded on Horus, his seraphic features hardening. 'You know the reason!' he answered with a snarl. 'I will not be responsible for the erasure of the Blood Angels from Imperial history. I will not have a third empty plinth beneath the roof of the Hegemon as my Legion's only memorial!'

Horus's eyes widened. 'It would not come to that.'

Sanguinius shook his head once more. ‘I cannot take the risk. The Emperor has concerns that go far beyond the needs of his individual sons. You know that is so.’ He frowned. ‘We all know that is so.’

Silence fell again, broken only by the hollow wind pulling at the ruined walls of the temple and the distant crash of metal as another nephilim praise-tower was cut down.

Then, with grim finality, Horus offered his hand to the Angel. ‘I swore to you I would say nothing of this. I will keep that promise for as long as you wish me to.’

Sanguinius accepted the gesture, their vambraces clanking together as they shook hands in the old pre-Unity fashion, palms grasping each other’s wrists. ‘I trust no one more than you, Horus,’ he said. ‘Your solidarity means more than I can express.’

‘I will do all I can to help you deal with this matter,’ said the Luna Wolf. ‘However long it takes.’

Raldoron barely covered his shock when not one, but two primarchs exited the ruined building. Without a word to any of the assembled warriors, Sanguinius and Horus walked away across the silver sands, each turning from the other to make for the lines of their Legions’ forces.

At his side, Azkaellon was as rigid as a statue, and the First Captain had no doubt that the leader of the Sanguinary Guard was silently furious. Horus’s appearance could only mean one thing. *He knew.*

Sensing his scrutiny, Azkaellon shot Raldoron a hard look. ‘Your warriors are ineffective.’

‘Watch your damned tone, bodyguard.’ The captain’s answer came back through gritted teeth. He pointed out beyond the ring of his troops. ‘Your second-in-command is slinking around out there, and he didn’t catch the primarch either.’

‘Zuriel will be reprimanded for his error, have no doubt of that.’

Raldoron didn’t. Azkaellon was so severe in his manner that sometimes it seemed he was utterly inflexible on anything. It was a frequent cause of friction between the warriors of the First Company and the Sanguinary Guard. Raldoron’s fluid, adaptable command style was at odds with Azkaellon’s aloof, rigid comportment, and the two of them reflected that down to the bone.

‘I have work to do,’ said the Guard Commander, striding away from the ruins. ‘I hope I can leave the rest of the details to you without fear of further error.’ Before Raldoron could retort, the flight pack on Azkaellon’s back spat flame and his sculpted wings unfurled. In a flash of gold, the warrior was gone.

The First Captain’s grimace deepened and he dismissed his warriors with a sharp gesture. He gave one of them a glare. ‘Where is the Apothecary? I called for a savant an hour ago!’

‘Here, lord,’ said a voice behind him.

Raldoron turned and found a legionary marching towards him across the rubble-strewn square, emerging from the smoke. The warrior’s crimson armour bore the white trim of a sanctioned Legion medicae, and from his battle plate hung narthecium packs, drug flasks and other flesh-cutter’s tools. His left gauntlet was heavily modified from the standard Mark II Crusade-pattern unit, bulky with the protruding barrel of a reductor. He wore the badge of the Prime Helix and there was a skull sigil on the brow of his helmet showing his status as an Apothecae Minoris, the most junior rank. A labour-servitor ambled after him, listing as it clumped over the uneven ground. The captain studied the Apothecary; he would have preferred a veteran to assist in this matter, but to re-task a more seasoned officer from their duties would have drawn undue attention.

The new arrival gave a salute. ‘Reporting as ordered.’ He gave no sign of having witnessed the departure of the two primarchs, which was just as well. *Fewer questions for him to dwell upon*,

thought the captain.

'You will follow me,' ordered Raldoron, 'and say nothing.'

They entered the fallen chapel and the Apothecary activated the illuminator mounted on his backpack. The cold ray of white light searched the chamber, picking out thousands of motes of rock dust suspended in the heavy air, before shimmering off the great liquid pool in the slumped spaces of the nave. Raldoron saw the beam venture towards the shadowed forms of the dead and he called out, dragging the young Apothecary's attention and the light to the podium where Alotros's body lay. The captain grimly stripped the dead battle-brother's armour of all company marks and personal icons, until there was nothing to show who this warrior might have been or where he had served.

'The progenoid glands,' said the captain. 'Remove them.'

There was a moment of hesitation on the part of the other Blood Angel, but the faceless helmet showed no expression, and soon he was at work. The reductor gave a high-pitched buzz as it bit through exposed flesh, the tip digging into the corpse before it splayed open and snipped out the gene-rich knots of meat. Each progenoid was a collection of DNA metadata expressed in organic form, the raw code of the Blood Angels physiognomy rendered as flesh; similar organs were implanted in every legionary, each tailored to the particular traits and quirks of their brotherhood. They were the most precious resource of a Space Marine Legion, for each progenoid recovered from a fallen warrior would find new life in the body of the next generation of recruits. In that way, they would maintain a genetic lineage with those who came before them and those who would come after, as the organs manifested within them.

The Apothecary reverently placed Alotros's gene-seed in a hermetic capsule, but before he could drop it into a seal-pouch at his hip, Captain Raldoron reached out and took it from him.

'What is your name, Apothecary?' asked the officer, forestalling any reaction.

'Meros, sir. Of the Ninth Company.'

'Captain Furio's command.' He nodded. 'A fine warrior. A company of regard.'

'Thank you, sir. But–'

Raldoron went on as if Meros had not spoken. 'The men of the Ninth know how to follow orders. So I have no doubt you will follow this one.' He fixed the young warrior with a steady glare. 'Never speak of this moment. You and I were never here.' He held up the capsule. 'This does not exist. Say it.'

Meros hesitated again, then spoke. 'You and I were never here. That does not exist.'

'This is our liege lord's wish.'

The other Blood Angel saluted again. 'So ordered.' He backed away a step as Raldoron beckoned the servitor to come forwards, making ready to gather up the corpse.

But before the machine-slave moved in to do his bidding, the First Captain removed an object from his belt pack. It was a slab of inkstone from the night deserts of Baal Primus, and with quick motions, Raldoron passed it over the dead warrior's armour, blotting out the crimson with a layer of glistening, smoky black. The action had a strange, ritual quality to it, a finality that deadened everything. However this battle-brother had met his end, it was in a manner that would be forever lost to the Legion's chronicles.

The captain whispered something, and Meros barely heard him.

'Rest, brother,' he told the fallen warrior. 'You are in the company of death. I hope you find peace there.'

PART I

THE NORTHERN CROSS

ONE

Rocks and Shoals
Silent Weapon
A Favour

Kano watched the stones fall through the dark towards him, looming larger and larger through the armourglass of the viewport. Pinnacles of rock larger than mountains wheeled and turned in the vacuum, surrounded by shaggy clouds of smaller particles that varied from the size of starship hulls to specks of dust. Tiny flakes of grit rattled off the hull of the Pugio-class boarding transport as it rumbled its way closer to their target, and close by he could see other craft of the same design moving in loose formation. Trailing behind were a squadron of Caestus assault rams, the thrusters of the winged bludgeons flaring bright yellow as they manoeuvred for terminal approach.

Their crimson hulls caught the cold and distant light of the bloated blue supergiant many light-seconds away across the vast span of the Kayvas Belt. What had once been a system of several rocky planets was now nothing but a colossal aggregation of asteroids. Some great cosmic cataclysm had shattered the planets aeons ago, and strewn their remains in the plane of an accretion disc hundreds of millions of kilometres across. Knots of gravitation around the biggest, continent-sized planetoids struggled to gather enough mass to reform, eternally failing. Kayvas was doomed to never evolve beyond rubble and debris. Its chaotic, unmappable environs made it an ideal hiding place for those too foolish or too desperate to be discouraged by unpredictable gravitic tides and constant asteroidal collisions.

The orks had made this place their refuge. Many tribes of the greenskin xenos, scattered and leaderless after the hammerblow they suffered at Ullanor, had fled to the points of the etheric compass – and many had come to rest in the Kayvas Belt, where they carved new outposts out of the drifting, mineral-rich rocks, licked their wounds and re-armed.

The aliens had already begun to put their heads above the parapet, striking out at nearby Imperial systems and newly compliant daughter colonies, and it was the duty of the Legiones Astartes to reinforce the lesson of Ullanor again. Over and over if need be, to exterminate every last one of the marauding, verminous savages.

The Alpha Legion had tracked them to their lair and petitioned Horus for the reinforcements required to prosecute their plan of annihilation, but after the war at the world called Murder and the disastrous engagement with the civilisation known as the Interex, the Luna Wolves had been reluctant to commit ships to Alpharius's campaign.

In the end, it was the Blood Angels who agreed to assist their cousins in the XX Legion, with Sanguinius himself marshalling a sizable intervention to support the ships of the 88th Expeditionary Fleet. The mission, Alpharius said, would be five years in execution. The Angel rejected that statement and promised it would be over in one, committing vessels from every active Blood Angels

expedition to the cause.

Sanguinius had been right – more or less. Just over thirteen months after the commencement of the Kayvas initiative, the orks were almost totally annihilated, but like animals backed into a corner they were fighting harder than they ever had before, and the battles came thick and fast. Kano struggled to remember a day over the past few weeks when he had *not* heard the skirl of alert sirens and the rumble of massive guns through the deck of the *Red Tear*, the Legion's flagship battle-barge.

But if he were to be truthful, he would admit that this campaign had been unsatisfactory from the very start. Indeed, many among his brothers lacked Kano's circumspect nature and had said so openly, and often. The game was the Alpha Legion's, so in deference to them the Blood Angels had followed their lead. But the promise of a glorious battle became a very different kind of engagement.

The 88th Expeditionary Fleet took their warships into the Kayvas Belt and vanished from sensors, leaving the Blood Angels flotilla at the edge of the system to wait; and soon it was clear that the mission Alpharius had been so eager to secure support for was little more than picket duty.

First one at a time, then in squadrons and finally in fleets, the orks began to flee from Kayvas. Each time they bolted for open space beyond the mass shadow of the supergiant sun and asteroid belt, the Blood Angels were waiting for them. Starships and ork cruisers engaged in deadly games of cat-and-mouse that lasted for weeks on end, threading in and out of the dense dust clouds at the periphery of the system, mercilessly hunting each other. Mighty vessels clashed again and again, but months of protracted ship-to-ship engagements and naval warfare made the sons of Baal restless. They were bred for battles where they could face their foes, not ranged conflicts conducted over huge spans of empty vacuum.

The chance to fight blade-to-blade did come, eventually. The behaviour patterns of the ork crews began to change. They eschewed what little animal cunning they had and made mistakes. Instead of showing the brutish slyness they were known for, the xenos exhibited conduct that more closely resembled *panic*. They would take chances, running the gauntlet of the Blood Angels blockade when the odds were stacked against them. It was almost as if there were something at their backs that they feared far more than the guns of Sanguinius's Legion.

Over and over, the orks were driven into the teeth of the Blood Angels, like rats fleeing a sinking ship. They fought with great violence, even attempting doomed tactics such as direct assaults on Legion starships or the initiation of warp engines while still deep within the gravimetric danger zone. The outer edges of the belt were littered with the corpses of countless ork ships, many of them left to smoulder like burning rags as their dying power cores bled out volatile streams of plasmatic gas.

No one knew what the Alpha Legion had done to make the orks run. Kano was adjutant to Captain Raldoron, and so often in a position to hear fragments of the information that passed though the highest levels of the Blood Angels command structure, but even he knew little. All that was certain was that the Alpha Legion had gone dark, only rising to send regular communiqués out to the blockade fleet that contained little more than a message to 'maintain the line'. The handful of orks that were captured alive gave incomprehensible answers under interrogation that muddied the waters still further. As the fleet stood and held the barricade, patrols scanning deep into the belt picked up all manner of hectic alien transmissions, and scry-sensors showed definite evidence of ork-versus-ork battles taking place closer to the blue sun. Then, several months into the campaign, ships in the spinward quadrant detected the destruction of a massive, moon-sized planetesimal by unknown means. Sanguinius himself sent queries to the 88th and the response was that the event was 'of no concern'.

Finally, the primarch tired of Alpharius's evasive manner and sent a frigate in past the outer marker, in defiance of the rules of engagement the two Legions had agreed upon. When the frigate returned weeks later, the crew reported that they had come across no signs of their allies, only the wrecks of ork vessels and the bodies of dead aliens. The 88th Expeditionary Fleet comprised hundreds of warships, and yet no trace of them was sighted.

Now the tempo of the Kayvas campaign was reaching a terminal pitch. The final remnants of the ork forces were taking flight from the belt in a disordered exodus, and perishing in the flashes of lance cannons and torpedo barrages as they crossed the sentry line. At last, Alpha Legion ships were appearing at the very edge of scanning range, apparently moving in a wall to herd the enemy towards the fringes of the system.

The last great capital ship the aliens could muster lay ahead of the Pugio and the other boarding craft. It was vaguely ovoid in shape, a gargantuan fist of brown rock that had been sheathed in patchwork plates of metal, its flanks festering with craters that sported gun turrets and the maws of missile tubes. A collage of engines was bolted crudely to one broad surface of the cannibalised asteroid, blaring out columns of thrust in a vain attempt to power the great hulk up and out of the plane of the ecliptic. As they approached, Kano picked out the tell-tale vanes of Geller field generators ringing the craft, like the spiked collar of a guardian dog. Weak violet light gathered around their tips, a sure sign that the crew of the craft were preparing to erect the protective energy membrane. Once that was done, the next stage would be to commit to translation into the warp.

Whatever shadow tactic the Alpha Legion employed had worked, and now the Blood Angels were going to strike the final blow, stopping this command ship dead before it could slip from real space and flee into the immaterium.

'Gather and prepare,' said a voice, and Kano turned to see that Captain Raldoron had entered the compartment from the upper flight deck. 'We will make our breach in a few minutes.'

The Pugio's troop bay was full, a handful of Tactical and Devastator squads lined up at the shock-frames mounted on the deck, ready to lock themselves in before the adamantine prow of the craft bit into the hull of the alien ship. All the men fell silent in respect for the captain. Kano had known Raldoron for decades and he seemed to have changed little in that time, the passage of the Great Crusade granting him only a few more scars, a shade more silver in his hair. He was still the strong, hard-faced veteran Kano had ever known; anything else that had altered about him was concealed like the flesh beneath his power armour.

He made a beckoning gesture to one of the other legionaries, who opened a metal box mag-locked to the deck plates. Inside was an old, familiar sight. They called it a chalice, but that was a misnomer, as it more closely resembled a tall, narrow tumbler. It was forged out of black, anodised metal and the outer surface of the cup was a forest of tiny, shallow spikes, each with a hollow tip.

Every warrior in the compartment was in the process of removing his right gauntlet, and Kano did the same without thinking about it. Raldoron had already done so, and he took the chalice with his bare hand and clasped it firmly, allowing the razor-sharp spikes to penetrate the dense flesh of his palm and draw blood. Then the captain handed the cup to the closest battle-brother to him – a veteran sergeant named Orexis – who in turn did the same. Orexis passed the chalice to the next warrior, and he to the next, so on and so on down the line of the Blood Angels. In a few moments the cup had circled the compartment and returned to Kano. He followed suit, noting that the spikes were now wet with the blood of a dozen battle-brothers, and the cup heavier with the fluid it had taken.

Finally, Raldoron took back the chalice and replaced his gauntlet. The others did the same, the ceramite locking in a chorus of tight snapping sounds. As his troops took their places in their support racks, the First Captain walked down the line of them, dipping his index finger into the mingled blood swirling in the cup. He gave each warrior a mark, a line of red across the right pinion of the *alatus cadere*, the Blood Angels Legion symbol of a winged droplet of ruby vitae.

Kano hesitated to call it a 'ritual'; that smacked of a religious act, and in the secular harmony of the Emperor's Imperium such things were not permitted. No, it was more truthful to call it a *tradition*, a pre-battle convention that had been a part of the culture of the planet Baal since before the War of the Burning. Even Terran-born legionaries like Orexis, joined with their Baalite brothers after the reuniting, had embraced the custom without issue. They understood the full the meaning of it.

By sharing their blood before the fight began, by every battle-brother taking a measure of the mingled vitae upon his armour, the pact between them was remade. Symbolically, the warriors affirmed their unity and the core truth that they were, now and for eternity, of the same blood. Other Legions shared an oath of moment before they committed to an engagement, swearing a vow upon a weapon; for the Blood Angels, this served the same purpose.

When it was done, they spoke the words together. 'For Sanguinius and the Emperor.'

The moment past, Kano gathered up his combat helmet and threw one last glance at the viewport. A wall of dun-coloured stone now filled the window, and he caught a brief glimpse of his own reflection in the armourglass. A serious face the colour of dark teak looked back at him, gaunt but not sallow.

Raldoron secured himself in the shock-frame next to his adjutant and lay back, closing his eyes for a moment. Strangely, the captain seemed almost peaceful, as if he were about to drop into a slumber.

Kano donned his helmet and his world changed, the emerald lenses of his helm activating with soft trills. Icons and display cues were transmitted directly into his cortex by neural interface, symbols blinking into being as the other warriors in the command squad sealed their armour and signalled readiness.

A countdown feed relayed from the Pugio's pilot rolled steadily towards a zero point as the boarding craft closed on the ork ship. Kano felt the deck shift beneath him as the vessel banked sharply, probably to avoid a flash of laser fire from the alien point-defence batteries.

Raldoron took control of the vox-network as the clock began to blink red. 'Brothers. We will breach the target at the foot of what appears to be a command tower. Our primary objective is to push through to the bridge of the vessel and render its control systems inactive. Once we stop them from running, we can purge the xenos…' Kano heard the cold smile in his voice. 'And then perhaps at last we will be done with this makeweight endeavour.'

A rumble of gruff agreement passed among the squads, and Kano could not help but join in.

Icons changed colour as the other warriors showed their ready status. 'Prepare to deploy,' said the captain.

Then the armoured bow of the Pugio struck the enemy ship and Kano's head slammed forwards and back.

He heard the sound of metal tearing.

The boarding action destroyed the ship that had carried them. The canny orks, aware that the humans might try to bring the fight to them, had reinforced the hull plates of their command ship, and this had

made the penetration a far more costly experience. The armoured troop compartment was proof against much, and it survived with its warriors intact; but the rest of the Pugio's fuselage was torn apart by the conflicting forces of the impact. Systems all through the craft's power train malfunctioned and fused. The pilot was already dead, his gravity web having strangled him in the collision, and the cogitators that acted as failsafes were ruptured beyond operable function.

If the boarding craft had been filled with common men, they all would have died; not in the impact, as the shock-frames did their jobs, but in the aftermath as the ship shut down and vented air to space. The legionaries, sealed in their armour and immune to such minor concerns, broke free. Under Raldoron's guidance, they forced open the petal-shaped sections of the forward hatch.

A torrent of sensations assailed them at once. Air escaping through the gaps around the makeshift seal made by the vanes of the boarding pod, shrill like the cry of a widow; the brisk and throaty bray of ork guns in the distance; the heavy midden-stench of alien foetor; the sudden shift in gravity.

Raldoron was first onto the stony deck of the ship, raising his weapon to his shoulder and gesturing for the rest of them to follow. Kano was behind him, pausing barely a moment to ensure his bolter was cocked and ready to deal death.

The sturdy Umbra Ferrox-pattern gun was decorated with honour marks and an adequate kill tally. In his earlier years of service, Kano had used a very different weapon in defence of the Legion. In a way, it still felt like a novelty for him to be relying on something as basic as a ballistic firearm, the core design of which had not greatly altered since before the age of Old Night.

Mirroring the captain's stance, Kano took his place among the second tier of the command squad and moved out into the long, low corridor where the Pugio had breached. The mag-locks in their boots thudded as the discharge of atmosphere tried to pull them off-balance. Further down the open space, other boarding craft knifed through the hull and settled in showers of twisted debris and fat yellow sparks. Ramps dropped and more warriors in crimson armour spilled out, engaging the first of the ork guards as they scrambled around a corner, heavy belt-fed cannons in their clawed hands.

Raldoron ignored the engagement and pointed forwards. 'Keep moving! We can't afford to slow down and engage. We have to press on.'

Kano nodded, still advancing. They had no way of knowing how long it would take the orks on the bridge to complete their pre-jump preparations. Based on observed behaviours gleaned from Imperial records, that interval could be anything from a few minutes to several hours. Ork technology was largely a random and inelegantly constructed thing, and no two greenskin ships were alike. It was all the more reason to move with alacrity. Kano didn't relish the idea of being trapped on board the alien vessel if it made the translation into warp-space. There would be no way of knowing when or where they would emerge… or even if they would survive the journey. Other Blood Angels units were hitting the ork ship in other places – he knew there were squads attacking the engine core and navigational blisters – but they could not rely on only one force achieving their mission objective.

The corridor branched and widened, changing from a tube of jury-rigged metal plate and rusted mesh to a huge flue that reached up several hundred metres. The aliens had turned the massive tube into an accessway by building a corkscrew ramp into the wall. It rose up in tight curves, turning in on itself, and webs of singing, flexing cable criss-crossed the interior, holding the platforms in some semblance of stability.

'A single rousing shout and that'll come down on our heads,' muttered one of Orexis's men.

'Then keep your voices down,' retorted Raldoron, without turning. 'Third and fourth squad, hold

this level. Second and first on me, advance by tiers.' He surged forwards at a jog. 'Take the pace!'

Kano broke into a run and went after his battle-brothers, automatically falling into a two-by-two overwatch formation as they sprinted up the incline. The deck beneath them swayed alarmingly as they rose, resonating with each armoured footfall, but it held steady.

Automated gun turrets were waiting for them on the fourth circuit, little more than boxes welded together out of scrap and oil drums, hoppers full of ammunition feeding clusters of growling guns. Raldoron didn't break stride, taking out the first with a hurled krak grenade and the second with a pinpoint pistol shot through the aiming slit that fouled the works inside. The others he left to the warriors of the second squad to kill – and they did, reducing the devices to smoking piles of wreckage.

But the auto-guns had been there more as early-warning devices than a concerted attempt to stop the advance of the legionaries, and the dull chatter of their attack brought orks swarming down the suspension cables from the upper levels of the access shaft.

Kano saw them coming, momentarily surprised by the agility the greenskins displayed as they swung like great simians, hand over hand across the yawning gap. Others actually abseiled in, hanging upside down with rapid-firing weapons in their hands. All of them were roaring in their own thuggish, mindless language.

The Blood Angels fired from the hip as they continued their ascent, meeting the orks head on. Aliens wearing curved panels of body armour landed in clumps on the lip of the ramp and made their attack, shooting or slashing with great bayonet-blades attached to the blackened muzzles of their guns.

One of them slammed down right next to Kano and bellowed at him, its yellow eyes misted with a kind of empty frenzy. In that split second he registered the necklace of bones and teeth about its neck, the rotting odour of its breath, the loutish swagger of its pose.

His lip curled behind his battle helm, antipathy rising for the brutal monstrosity. The ork was thickset, easily the same mass as Kano, but it wasn't slow. It had a twin-barrelled long gun that had been mated to a double-bladed axe, and it discharged the weapon and slashed with it all at once.

Kano's reactions were not conscious, but instinctive. He turned into the bolter at his hip with a twist of his torso and squeezed the trigger, allowing the weapon's powerful recoil to pull the muzzle up in a three-round semi-automatic burst. The first round clipped the ork's leg, blasting a fist-sized divot of flesh out of the green meat of its thigh; the second and third shots hit home in its stomach and sternum. The impact blew it back over the lip of the ramp and the creature spiralled away, bouncing off cables until its fall ended messily upon the deck far below.

His target eliminated, the warrior was already racing ahead, switching his bolter to single-shot mode and raising it to his chest. As he ran, he fired rounds into every ork that still had the temerity to remain standing. The mass-reactive shells became part of the same crashing chorus spilling from the weapons of his brothers. They cut through the alien defenders without pause and continued to rise, deck by deck, towards the top of the shaft.

'Grenades,' called Raldoron. 'Impact setting.'

The forward squad all mimicked the First Captain's action, drawing a drum-shaped munition from their belts, priming it.

'Ready. Loose!'

Half a dozen grenades looped through the air and struck the heavy armoured door sealing off the

upper level.

Kano put up the blade of his gauntleted hand to shield his eye-slits from the multiple magnesium-bright flashes of the explosions. A chain of thunder-rumbles sounded and the hatch sagged back on fractured hinges, dropping to the deck with a hollow boom.

Raldoron did not need to order them forwards. The Blood Angels shifted into a double wedge formation, the first entering the wide antechamber beyond the door and taking up overwatch positions, the second moving forwards to find the next place to hold. Each holding station for the other, the two squads moved down the tunnel, swapping between leading and trailing positions.

Ahead the passage widened, large enough that it could have accommodated a pair of Rhino troop transports moving side-by-side. What might have been storage compartments and equipment bays branched off at irregular intervals, while beneath their feet and over their heads, metal gantries concealed lines of piping and cables that puffed blue sparks. The fungal, earthy stench of the xenos was thicker in here, reaching through the filters of their breather grilles.

Kano saw Orexis pause at a mass of rags in an alcove; no, not rags. It was the remains of an ork gunner. 'There was a firefight,' he reported. 'Very recent.'

The legionary glanced around, and made out more heaps of dead aliens, clearly delineated into two groups on either side of the corridor. 'They killed each other…?' Kano wondered aloud. The differing bands of orks didn't seem to look any different to one another at first sight, all of them bearing the same tribal glyphs crudely rendered on their armour, the same tattoos and ritual scars. He shared a look with the sergeant and wondered if the veteran was thinking the same thing as himself: was this more evidence of the Alpha Legion's hand at work?

But then something different crowded unbidden into Kano's mind, and he tensed automatically, resisting it by reflex even as he felt his gorge rise. 'Orexis–!'

The sergeant's name slipped from his mouth in a shout, just as the body of the dead ork moved, revealing another lying beneath it. A saw-toothed blade flashed as the hidden alien stabbed upwards, aiming for the flexible joint between the veteran's thigh-plates. The knife scraped across red ceramite, but the action was lost in the din of a renewed attack.

'Ambush!' shouted the captain, as other orks similarly concealed beneath the bodies of their dead exploded into life. There were more in the gantries overhead, their thermal signatures lost in the heat bloom from the poorly shielded power cables; they kicked out the mesh beneath them and dropped en masse into the middle of the Blood Angels formation, firing in all directions.

Kano was closest to Orexis and he stormed towards him, battering an ork gunner that tried to block him with the butt of his boltgun. The blow was of such force that it smashed the bones of the greenskin's skull into its brain cavity, killing it instantly.

Fire blossomed at his back and Kano half-turned to see an ork with a massive shoulder-mounted flamer weapon ropes of burning, pressurised fuel about the chamber in what seemed like random motions. He fell into a forward roll and came up firing. Other shots joined his and abruptly the ork with the flamer detonated like a bomb – doubtless from some random bolt-round finding the weak spot in the fuel tank.

Orexis was busy killing the alien that had attempted to stab him, the warriors with him engaging the emerging orks; but the aftermath of the exploded flamer did not end with the orange fire billowing down the corridor, over their helmets.

Suddenly, rounds were cooking off as the flames failed to die out, instead taking hold across the

fallen corpses of the dead aliens. Too late, Kano saw the spreading inferno envelop the body of an ork that had died carrying a quiver full of heavy, armour-piercing rifle grenades on its back.

A second, more powerful detonation, confined in the stone flue of the carved asteroidal rock, sounded with such power that it blasted all the combatants off their feet. The noise of it was loud enough to top out Kano's autosenses in the split-second before the protective blocks cut in to protect the neural interface. Stone ground on stone, and great chunks of rock and metal sheared off in planes, choking the corridor. The unlucky, Space Marine and ork alike, were buried. Suddenly, Raldoron's assault force was cut in two, the majority of the legionaries on the wrong side of the debris with the ambushers.

Sergeant Orexis finished off the last of the aliens on their side of the rubble and took a shaky step forwards, reaching up to tap his helmet. It was only then that Kano saw that the veteran had not survived the engagement without a wound. Dark arterial blood shimmered, a river of it flowing down his thigh and pooling on the deck. The fact that the vitae wasn't clotting immediately meant that the cut had not only been deep, but also envenomed.

Kano jerked a finger at the veteran and one of his warriors came to the sergeant's aid. 'Captain!' he called into his vox, looking away. 'Status?'

Through gaps in the wall of fallen stone he could see the flash of gunfire, hear the snarl of orks in their melee. Raldoron's voice came back across his helmet speakers in tight chugs of breath. '*Don't wait for us, Kano! Get to the bridge!*'

He nodded; it would take several minutes to shift enough of the fallen debris to get through to where they stood, and that was time they could ill-afford to spend.

Kano turned back to Orexis. 'Sergeant, can you run?'

'Yes,' spat the veteran, but then he took a heavy step and faltered, hissing in deep pain. 'Blood damn it! *No*.'

Kano looked at the legionary closest to Orexis. 'Help him.' Then he beckoned to the other pair of Space Marines who stood nearby, two Baalites named Cador and Racine. 'Come, we must not tarry.'

More of the scrap-iron auto-turrets were waiting for the three Blood Angels at the terminus of the corridor, a line of them jerking the snouts of their guns back and forth on clockwork armatures. Cador bore a heavy bolter that made light work of them, sending a salvo of high-calibre rounds into the units that blew them apart in balls of red flame.

Racine, armed with a standard bolter like Kano, came with him to the hatch that led into the command ship's bridge deck, and together they hauled the door open just enough to admit a handful of blind grenades. Kano slammed the hatch shut again with the flat of his back and listened for the discharge. Then he had it open again and the three Space Marines burst into the nerve centre of the massive ork warship.

They found it abandoned.

'Throne's sake…' grimaced Cador, sweeping his big gun back and forth. 'Where are the blighted things?'

Kano advanced, finding a few ork corpses slumped on the deck plates or fallen over their clanking consoles. 'All dead,' he began, pulling one up by a wiry topknot on its scalp. 'But let's not be fooled again.' He had his combat blade out and he stabbed the dead ork in the eye. It slid off the cutting edge without reacting. 'Check them all, to be sure.'

Racine was already doing the grisly deed, methodically knifing each corpse, scanning for booby-traps and the like. 'Same as out in the passage. They killed each other.'

Kano frowned, looking around the bridge compartment. The question as to why the aliens had gone on a fratricidal rampage would have to wait; even with his limited technological acumen, Kano could tell from the flickering gauges and livid lights across the control panels that the ork ship was about to discharge a great amount of power. That could only mean that the warp gate would soon be created. He took that on, realising what it meant – the other units had not been able to neutralise the reactors or engines. It was up to the three of them to stop the escape of the alien vessel.

'We're the only ones to make it up here?' Racine asked, his thoughts paralleling those of the adjutant. 'What about the other squads?'

'Might be bogged down,' ventured Cador. Other units deposited on the opposite side of the tower structure by their boarding craft would have been making their way to the same target point, and if the orks had left sentry turrets and set ambushes for Raldoron's troops, it stood to reason their battle-brothers would have run across the same obstacles elsewhere on the ship. 'We made it here first. We'll remind them of that back on the *Tear* when this sorry business is all behind us.'

Kano listened absently. The bridge was a circular, arena-like space with a podium in the centre, raised high so that any ork serving as its commander would be able to look down upon those ranked below it and bellow out orders as needed. Workstations ripped from human ships and other pieces of cobbled-together technology ringed the chamber, cables snaking back and forth underfoot like the taproots of an overgrown tree; there were a number of other hatches like the one they had entered through, but all were locked shut. Finally, Kano spotted what he guessed had to be a command input, a low podium with a hololithic projection orb suspended above it. The sphere of light was filled with vectors and dots of light that resembled star clusters.

He raised his bolter. The time for a subtle, nuanced approach to the mission had long passed. If in doubt, he assured himself, destroy it.

His finger was tightening on the trigger when it happened *again*. The same faint, sickly sensation deep in his gullet, like a sip of soiled water; the same unwanted presence slipping over the surface of his consciousness, even as he tried to forget how to feel such things.

Kano was so fixated on trying to banish the reaction that he was looking the wrong way when a sudden flare of emerald energy burst into life at the foot of the commander's dais. The fouled air turned metallic and greasy with the discharge of warped energies, and from nothing came an ork that appeared to be a mutant cousin to those lying dead on the gore-streaked floor plates.

It matched Kano's height in full armour and its fanged skull was oddly misshapen. Sickly skin was drawn tight over its bones, but its sunken eyes blazed like golden embers, so bright that Kano couldn't look directly at them. In the moment of hesitation before all hell broke loose, Kano saw the familiar phenomenon of psychic lightning dancing around the ork's head. Little commas of light made a coruscating halo, and more motes of colour gathered at the creature's hands, one of which held a tall copper staff.

An orkish psyker; it seemed fanciful to conceive that the xenos brutes were anywhere near the mental complexity needed to engage with such extranormal powers, but the evidence was standing there before them. Through sheer force of mind, the alien had teleported itself into the bridge chamber. Perhaps it had been nearby in another compartment, telepathically scanning for an invader; it was of no importance. All that was required was to kill it.

Cador opened up with the heavy bolter and his fusillade roared, blasting into the commander's podium – but the ork wasn't there any more, blurring across the bridge in an oozing flicker of warp-glow, too fast for the gunner to traverse his weapon. Racine had been caught with his bolter slung, the combat blade still in his mailed fist, and he feinted backwards, making space to go for the gun; but the ork was upon him.

A fountainhead of green lightning erupted from the tip of the xeno-psyker's metal staff, spilling out across the deck. The cascade rolled over the bodies of its dead comrades and the corpses twitched and writhed, almost as if the charge was trying to reanimate them. The wash of energy caught Racine and he snarled in agony, shocked rigid.

Kano fired at the alien but it moved again, a blur like amber light refracted through a window streaked with rain. Then he felt it *inside his head*.

What mental barriers he had were out of practice and slow to erect, and it wormed into him. Suddenly his nostrils were filled with a rancid shit-stink and he became dizzy. The ork psyker scrambled towards him, but then as quick as it had come, the mental invasion vanished as more heavy bolt shells sang through the air. Cador had his range and was bracketing the alien.

Kano spun away, shaking his head to clear the ghost of the psychic assault, and he saw the ork answer Cador's interruption with an attack of its own. A ray of bilious yellow fire burst from the ork's eye sockets and swept the chamber like a searchlight, charring everything that fell beneath it. The psychic beam hit the Blood Angel and he was blasted backwards, the surface of his battle armour scorched from blood-red to soot-black.

The bolter was in Kano's hands and he pulled the trigger, unleashing a salvo of shots into the creature's side. It hooted in pain and turned on him, the glow of its eyes dimming for a moment before blazing anew. The gun's breech cycled open and locked, and Kano cursed inwardly; in the fog of confusion that came after the mind-strike upon him, he had lost track of the dwindling ammunition in his bolter's clip, and now the weapon was dry.

The alien raised the copper staff and gave a sing-song grunt, like a mantra, calling upon powers from the warp. Time slowed for Kano and he suddenly knew exactly, precisely, *how* the ork psyker was tapping into the mad telepathic churn of the immaterium. He could see it in his mind's eye like a string of complex equations, or the stanzas of a poem. He knew how that power worked because he had experienced it himself, channelled it through his own fingers.

And although it seemed like a lifetime ago, Kano knew with absolute certainty that he could do so again. His hands came up in a clawed fighting pose, the action trained into his marrow, and the alien saw it. The creature paused, and it knew it faced a being that *understood*.

But then the air was shrieking with new bolter fire and the ork came apart under the force of a dozen guns. Kano spun about to see one of the other hatches hanging open and a squad of legionaries surging through it. Leading them was a figure in armour as dark as the void, face hidden behind a glowering skull-mask helm. He aimed with a short rod, the device tipped with a winged crest. 'No trace!' shouted a rough, rasping voice.

Kano fell out of the line of fire and threw himself at his original objective – the command console. As he reached it he became aware of a bass rumble shaking him through his boots. The entire vessel was vibrating wildly as its power systems reached the terminal phase for translation into warp space.

The Blood Angel didn't hesitate, and he brought down his empty boltgun on the console, smashing the hololith projector, the controls, breaking it open to reveal crystalline circuitry within and an

infinitely complex mesh of cross-connecting silver wires. Like a trip-hammer, Kano rained blow after blow on the machine until there was nothing but sparkling fragments and silence from the deck beneath his feet.

After what seemed like an age, he turned away from the panel and found the warrior in black looming over him.

The words that ground out of the skull-helm's breather grille were not what Kano had expected.

'Do you know who I am?' The tone was accusatory.

He stiffened, defiance rising in his manner. 'That black armour can only signify one thing. You are a Warden of the Legion.'

The skull moved in a shallow nod. 'Such is my burden and my honour.'

Armoured fingers rose to remove the headgear, revealing a face like a block of carved marble, cold and pale. Hard eyes that knew little pity scanned Kano and the Blood Angel felt compelled to doff his helmet also. He resisted the urge to wipe the sheen of sweat from his dark skin. The other man's comportment was already wearing on him.

'I am Yason Annellus. Walk with me.' It was a command, of that there was no doubt, and after a moment Kano obeyed, but he did so hesitantly. The post of 'Warden' was a relatively rare position among the Legion and the ranks of the men who held the office were open to interpretation. All that Kano could be sure of was that Annellus wore the laurels of a senior veteran embossed on his pauldrons and that, if nothing else, earned him a degree of respect.

But only a degree, he reminded himself.

Kano followed Annellus back through the second open hatch and into another wide corridor. He caught the odour of orkish blood and looked back, spotting the bodies of dozens of the dead aliens. The sorry remnants of another ambush, he guessed.

Annellus rounded on him. 'You are Mkani Kano, Baalite born of the Far Sear, legionary of the First Company.'

'You know me?'

'I know *all* of you.'

Kano frowned at the strange emphasis on the Warden's words, and a chill moved through him as he experienced the slow rise of understanding. 'All of us?' he echoed, working to maintain an even tone.

Annellus placed the ornamental rod he carried in a skeletal holster at his hip. The device had a two-fold purpose: not only was it a mace-like power weapon, lethal in close combat, but it also served a ceremonial function. In the old tongue of Terra, the weapon was known as a *crozius arcanum*. It was the Warden's badge of office, like the black armour, that set him eternally aside from his battle-brothers.

The Wardens were the watchmen of the Blood Angels. In some ways they served as mentors for the younger legionaries, battlefield instructors and learned veterans who shared knowledge with the rest of their kindred; but they were also charged with sustaining coherence throughout the tens of thousands of warriors that filled the ranks of the IX Legion Astartes. That could mean anything from offering suggestions to a captain on a point of combat doctrine, to leading a ceremony of remembrance to the fallen. They were lore-keepers, counsellors, teachers. In the deep past, men who had served in similar roles in other militaries had been known as *diaconus*, *zampol*, *chaplain* or a dozen other names – some political, some religious, some secular. They existed outside the chain of

command but still within its ranks, maintaining that most Imperial of ideals throughout the Legion; *unity*.

And with that role came a sense of judgement.

'How long has it been since the great conclave of Emperor and his sons on Nikaea?' Annellus asked, and Kano knew his suspicions were correct.

'Long enough,' he replied, schooling his features. 'I was not there to see the Angel and his brothers come before their father–'

'But you know full well what was wrought in that place.' It was not a question.

Kano's patience thinned. 'Don't be obtuse, Warden. Of course I know. The decree absolute. The Edict of Nikaea.'

'A command from the Emperor of Mankind himself,' Annellus went on, his words taking on a lecturing tone. 'A warning about the dark potential of the powers of the warp.' The Warden turned back to face him. 'A command Sanguinius echoed, to forbid the use of preternatural powers within the Legiones Astartes. A command the Blood Angels accepted without question.'

He said nothing, waiting for the indictment to surface. Despite his role as Captain Raldoron's adjutant, in the strictest sense Kano was of no greater rank than that of a veteran Space Marine sharing the same number of duty studs in his brow. He was a warrior of the line, one among one hundred and twenty thousand such souls; but before the decision at Nikaea, Kano had been so much more.

Then he had been Librarius Minoris Kano, sanctioned psyker and warrior of the mind. Not an unregulated witchkin of the backwater worlds, but a finely-honed weapon in service to the Blood Angels and the Imperium. He had been proud to focus the turmoil of the warp's great energies against his Legion's enemies. Kano's honour roll included many battles where he had helped turn the tide for his primarch.

But after Nikaea, all that had changed. He remembered the day as clearly as if it had happened only hours ago. Raldoron coming to him with word from Sanguinius, the captain standing there with another figure in black armour at his heel, arms outstretched to take Kano's crystalline psychic hood as he removed it from the gorget of his battle plate.

Raldoron's hand upon his shoulder. His words. '*This does not lessen you, Kano, none of you. It is only a single facet of your arsenal that has been taken away. Like thousands of your brothers, you are still the greatest soldiers that mankind has ever mustered. And for now, that will be enough.*'

'The Emperor did not make his decision lightly, Kano,' Annellus was saying. 'But after the actions of Magnus the Red and his Thousand Sons, there was little choice. I know you understand that.'

Still Kano kept his silence. It would be anathema for him to ever consider turning against the will of the Emperor and Sanguinius, but he could not deny that a tiny kernel of doubt had lodged in his spirit on that day. Until the passing of the edict, there had never been a moment when Kano had felt *distrusted* by his battle-brothers. But now he wondered if that had only been naïveté on his part. There were always those who looked unkindly upon the powers of the mind and saw only the hazards that they encompassed. The great psyker-primarch Magnus had brought all that to a head with his reckless exploration into the deeper, darker places of the warp, drawing his father's great displeasure and this draconian response.

Kano thought of his abilities as alike to a boltgun or a sword; a dangerous thing in the hands of fools and the undisciplined, but a fine weapon when wielded by one who had mastery of it. Perhaps, somewhere in the secret and unspoken places of his heart, he almost resented being told he was not

capable of controlling his abilities. He dismissed the thought with a frown, watching Annellus and waiting.

'Our Imperium is a place of united resolve and collaboration,' the Warden insisted. 'We will reach utopia under the Emperor's guidance at the end of the Great Crusade, each human playing their part in the whole just as we serve the Legion and the Angel. But for that to be so, no one person can defy the greater will.' He came closer. 'Those who believe that the collective's conventions do not apply to them, even if they are a being as great as Magnus the Red, are sorely mistaken. We all march together, Kano. We all must play our part.'

He held his silence no longer. 'I have never done otherwise. I am a dutiful son of Sanguinius. Are you suggesting that is not so, Warden? I would prefer directness rather than a lecture more suited to a neophyte recruit.'

Annellus folded his ceramite-plated arms. 'You have very good *instincts*, Kano.' The Warden made the word sound somehow immoral. 'It has been brought to my attention. And then I found myself arriving on the bridge of this alien monstrosity to see you engaged in battle with a xenos mind-witch. An interesting coincidence.'

'Your help was appreciated in dispatching the ork.'

The other Blood Angel kept talking. 'Your gun was empty, yes? Tell me, if I had not arrived with the other squad, how were you going to fight it?' He gestured at Kano, mimicking his earlier attack pose. 'I saw you raise your hands.'

'With tooth and nail, if that is what I was left with.'

'Is that all?'

Kano's jaw set. 'With all due respect,' he began, his tone making it abundantly clear he meant none, 'if you have an accusation to voice, then speak it. I'm in no mood for games.'

Annellus's pale face darkened. 'I don't accuse,' he snapped. 'I uphold the will of the Legion!'

'As do I!' Kano shot back, his ire building. 'And I do so by putting my life in harm's way for Sanguinius and the Emperor, not by second-guessing the intentions of my brothers!'

The force of his words gave the Warden pause; when he spoke again, Annellus's annoyance was burning cold. 'I have only your best interests in mind.'

Kano knew he should turn away and end this conversation where it lay, but he found that he could not. 'I don't think you understand the interests of men, Warden. Our great Imperium? It is a collection of individuals, of different people coming together to build something incredible. And each of them has a different heart and soul, different wants and needs. I think perhaps you have spent too long looking at the great tower, and not the stones that form it.' The last he said in a deliberate attempt to echo Annellus's earlier hectoring manner, before finally turning to return to the bridge compartment.

'The individual who does not conform risks censure,' said the Warden, calling after him. 'That is fact, whatever you may want or need, whatever your heart and your soul tell you.'

What little remained of Kano's temper snapped and he spun back, raising his hand, jabbing an angry finger. 'You–'

'Adjutant!' The shout came from behind him, hard and loud like the flat bang of a bolter discharge. Captain Raldoron strode through the open hatch and approached the two of them, his eyes narrowed. 'Report!'

'Kano was just explaining something to me–' began Annellus, but the First Captain silenced him with a look.

‘I wasn’t addressing you, Warden,’ he snapped. ‘Whatever you were distracting my legionary with, you’re finished for now.’

Those words made it clear that Raldoron had heard some, if not all of their conversation. Kano did not dwell on that, and made his report. He explained quickly about the events of the ork psyker’s assault, and the destruction of the control unit. The captain listened stoically, offering no comment, and only when Kano was done did he speak again.

‘Regroup with the wounded men, fall back to the boarding craft. We have orders to deploy thermal charges aboard this hulk and obliterate it.’

‘And the other ork ships?’ said Annellus.

‘There are no other ork ships left,’ Raldoron told him, with a grimace. ‘Alpharius has finally communicated with our primarch. The Alpha Legion state they have fully exterminated the alien infestation in the Kayvas Belt, and are grateful to the Blood Angels for their co-operation. This blockade is over, and the death of this monolithic wreck will mark the end of it.’ He reached for his helmet, to raise it up and settle it over his head. ‘The Angel commands us to return to our warships and make ready for our next mission.’

‘Is there any hint as to where?’ Kano asked, his crossed words with Annellus forgotten for the moment.

Raldoron’s helm snapped into place. ‘A place where we can fight a proper war, I hope.’

On every deck of the warship *Andronius*, the Emperor’s Children prepared to make war. Under the direct authority of Fulgrim’s assigned representative, the Lord Commander Eidolon, the warriors of the III Legion Astartes made ready their blades and their armour. Their ranks massed for the engagement to come; ahead lay the Isstvan system and the objective of the 63rd Expeditionary Fleet. Led by the Warmaster Horus Lupercal, the combined forces of legionaries from the Sons of Horus, the Death Guard, World Eaters and the Emperor’s Children were gathering to prosecute the dissident worlds of Isstvan.

That was one truth; another lurked below, swimming in shadows and conspiracy, but it would not be revealed for some time.

For now neither matter, of the coming battle or the larger plans of the Warmaster, impinged on the thoughts of the Apothecary Fabius. While others of his Legion would prepare themselves for the fight in their own ways – in the practice cages, by meditating or engaging in the ephemeral arts – he found peace of mind here, in his laboratorium.

The chamber was sparsely lit but not gloomy with it. The illumination cast by the cogitator screens and bio-capsules ranged around the compartment gave it a cool cerulean hue that Fabius found calming. Here he could work on the puzzles of flesh and genome that so fascinated him without fear of interruption, or the questions of the less inquisitive and more conservative of his brethren.

Others might have been irritated by the means and method open to him, to be forced to work here in this secret place, out of sight as if his experiments were something aberrant and wrong. But he knew what men of limited understanding would say if confronted by his endeavours. Sometimes it was necessary for genius to toil in the shadows, and if it took a thousand years or more for Fabius’s artistry to be acknowledged, then so be it. He was already enhancing himself to ensure he would live that long, and more.

The Apothecary paused and admired his work. A delicate patch of human flesh, carefully excised

from a living donor, modified and altered using gene-engineering methods to more closely resemble the epidermis of an armoured serpent. Given time, this process might be transferable to a subject outside the laboratory environment, toughening their skin beyond even the fortitude bred into the original organic template of the Space Marines.

Fabius folded back the micro-optical lenses of the headset he wore and muttered a new log entry into the vox-thief holding the data for this experiment.

When he looked up, he was no longer alone. There, out of the glow of the screens, half-hidden in the shadows cast by the stasis pods along the far wall, stood a figure in power armour.

'Lord Commander?' Fabius's first assumption was that it would be Eidolon.

'No,' came a voice. 'Your commander is busy marshalling his forces and polishing his armour.'

Fabius put down the beam-scalpel in his hand and stood straight, alarm rushing through him. The laboratorium was deliberately secluded, a secret facility concealed beneath the great vestibule of the *Andronius*'s central apothecarion. Access was only granted to a select few, by means of a concealed trapdoor hidden in the vestibule's ornamental mosaic.

'Identify yourself,' he demanded.

'Do not be troubled, Fabius. The secrets of the Emperor's Children have always been safe with me.' The figure came slowly into the light, palms open in a gesture of sincerity, and the Apothecary immediately recognised the granite-grey armour of the Word Bearers Legion.

'Erebus.' At once he felt a conflict within him, an easement of concern at being discovered mingled with the uncertainty of the so-called First Chaplain's insouciant approach. 'How did you get in here?'

The Word Bearer nodded towards the spiral staircase leading back up to the vestibule. 'I did knock. Perhaps you didn't hear me?' He kept walking, eyeing the contents of chemical baths as he passed them, and the organ matter arranged carefully on Fabius's work station. 'You did seem very engrossed.'

'Who gave you permission to enter?' he demanded.

'Does that matter?' Erebus halted in front of a series of tall stasis pods, each of them sealed behind plasteel shutters. 'It's true what I was told. The work you are doing here is quite incredible. Few men would have the courage to tamper with the Emperor's great design.'

'I do not *tamper*,' Fabius retorted. 'I enhance. I *improve*.' He frowned; the Word Bearer was attempting to deflect him. 'You should not be here. This is Legion business.'

Erebus shook his head. 'Come, Fabius, don't limit yourself. Your work has meaning far beyond the bounds of the Emperor's Children, you must admit. Perhaps you haven't dared to truly consider the full ramifications of that, but you know it to be true.' When he didn't answer, the Chaplain went on. 'I know there are some who would consider your… unsanctioned research distasteful, but not I.'

Slowly, Fabius found himself coming around to the question that Erebus was waiting for him to ask. 'What do you want?'

That earned him a thin smile. 'Only a favour.'

Fabius grimaced, wondering what scope – and what cost – any such favour would encompass. 'Why would I wish to assist you?'

Erebus's false smile stiffened. 'Because if you do, I would be in your debt. And I assure you, Apothecary, it would be better for you to have my obligation at hand, rather than my enmity.' He held the silence for a moment. 'I would count you as a friend among the Emperor's Children, just as I have other friends among other Legions.'

‘Other friends,’ Fabius echoed.

‘Yes,’ Erebus said with a nod. ‘We are on the cusp of great change. Old rules and structures torn down, swept away. In the aftermath, the bonds between men of vision will be of great importance.’ The Word Bearer walked to one of the shuttered capsules and tapped it. ‘This is what I want. Something from your collection.’

He pulled the capsule’s lever, and the slats folded back to reveal the body of a legionary inside, floating in a thick, oleaginous fluid.

The warrior seemed dead at first glance. Pallid and corpse-grey, his naked body was a ragged mess of cuts and contusions. Down his right side, chunks of flesh had been ripped away with animal brutality; pieces of him torn out along his ribcage, hip and upper thigh. His right arm ended just below the elbow in rags of sinew and skin. More savage gouges were visible across his neck and sternum.

The warrior’s face was hidden from view behind a monitor mask clamped over his nostrils and lips like a suffocating hand, and unkempt blond hair formed a rough halo around his head. He bore service studs in his brow and several battle-tattoos across his chest and shoulders. Most prominent was the Legion sigil of a crimson blood drop borne on wings of white.

Erebus studied the Blood Angel in the tank with dispassion. ‘This was done on the planet called Murder,’ he pronounced. ‘I recognise the work of the megarachnid.’ He turned back to face Fabius. ‘Tell me, how did you manage to get him off the surface without alerting his Legion?’ When the Apothecary didn’t answer, he smiled again. ‘It doesn’t matter. The Blood Angels must believe him dead, or else they would not have stopped looking.’

The warrior was alive, of course. Not in the sense that Fabius and Erebus were alive, but buried deep in a comatose state that resembled the quietus of the grave. So severe had been the Blood Angel’s injuries that his body shut itself down, the bio-implants within him trying desperately to heal the damage.

‘Have you taken all you wanted from him?’ Erebus asked, without weight.

Fabius coloured. ‘I harvested what little was left of his gene-seed, but the majority was already destroyed. I have DNA and bio-templates.’

‘And yet you still let him live.’ The Chaplain studied the Apothecary. ‘Why? The stasis container holds him in a non-state, unable to either fully heal or succumb to his wounds. Some might consider that torture.’

It was Fabius’s turn to give a cold reply. ‘I never dispose of anything that might come in useful.’

‘And your wisdom has been proven right. I will take this one, and you will have my gratitude.’ He turned to summon a silent auto-servitor from a holding pen across the chamber, but Fabius interrupted him.

‘Why do you want this half-corpse? What use is it to you?’

‘That’s not your concern.’

‘Suppose I make it my concern.’ The Apothecary casually laid his hand upon a medicae needler resting on his work station. Employed as a weapon at close range, the device could be as deadly as an eldar shuriken gun.

Erebus’s tone did not change, and that made the threat that followed all the more chilling. ‘Then the full scope of what you are doing here would come to light. Not just the genetic modifications, the splicing of Emperor’s Children gene-code with that of xenos strains and other Legions… But also your systematic and clandestine seizure of injured warriors from the battlefields of the Great Crusade,

for your own experimentation.' He nodded at the other shuttered capsules. 'Angron, Mortarion, even the Warmaster… Do you think they would overlook your *abduction* of their legionaries?'

Fabius sneered. 'Take what you want and get out.'

'Many thanks,' Erebus replied, as the blind servitor detached the capsule and mounted it on a wheeled transport pallet. 'And I promise that this gift you give me will help bring another Legion to the Warmaster's banner.' He smiled again. 'At least, that is one option.'

TWO

Gathered in Question
Acolyte
The Face in the Smoke

Within and without, the *Red Tear* was a shipwright's work of art. The vessel carried the flag of the Blood Angels whenever the primarch left the Legion home world, and like Sanguinius himself, his craft was a sight to behold.

Viewed from the bow, the battle-barge resembled an arrowhead ten kilometres from stem to stern, lined in bright copper, bronze and crimson steel. The maws of nova cannon, mega-lasers, mass-drivers and torpedo hives encrusted the forward quarter, presenting an arsenal comparable to that of a whole fleet of smaller vessels. Acres of towers ranged away down the length of the craft, extending out from the dorsal and ventral hulls. In the fashion of Imperial starships, modelled on the deck-by-deck design ethic laid down for the *Red Tear*'s ancient, ocean-going ancestors, a massive citadel rose from the aft quarter. This huge conning tower resembled a gigantic fortress, an outer keep of soaring adamantium walls and glassaic windows forming the base and a wide cylindrical donjon rising higher still. At its apex, among the saw-tooth battlements and point-defence batteries, a massive transparent dome looked out into the void like an unblinking eye.

Similarly, beneath the central plane of the main hull, a blade-like keel dropped away, thinning to a wicked point. Here were many of the battle-barge's secondary cannons and the hangars for the warship's auxiliary craft. Cavernous docking bays, large enough to house and maintain a brace of escort frigates, ran the width of the vertical structure.

But it was from above that the true martial glory of the *Red Tear* was revealed. If an observer could place themselves at a point high up over the centre of the warship's hull, looking down they would see that the ship gave iron reality to its name. The battle-barge was built around the form of a great ruby teardrop, and from its port and starboard sides, winglets bearing engine clusters and troop bays reached outwards, mimicking the design of the Legion sigil of the Blood Angels. Against the black and infinite dark, the *Red Tear* was a sculpture that showed the proud defiance of humankind. It was at once monument, weapon and fortress of the sons of Sanguinius – and a worthy chariot for a primarch.

Other vessels, ranging in tonnage from gunboats to grand cruisers, moved in formation with their command ship. Around them, Hawkwing and Raven interceptors maintained a wide security cordon about the flotilla. There was a new energy in the fleet, a reinvigorated sense of purpose. After month upon month of standing post in a relatively unchallenging campaign, to a man the Blood Angels were eager to quit this sector of space and rejoin the fuller glories of the Great Crusade.

Word spread fast through the ships of the IX Legion, carried by the human crews and Legion serfs, even the contingent of civilian remembrancers assigned to document the fleet's mission. Rumours

were voiced, whispered in hushed tones over mid-meal or spoken out of earshot of senior officers. Even the legionaries themselves were not immune to the speculation that was rife. The combined *Red Tear* fleet was on the move, courses already being prepared to make space along the line of a distant warp beacon; out in the deeps, the eternal lighthouse of Terra's Astronomican had become vague and hazy in recent weeks, requiring the use of the secondary waypoint markers commonly used by Imperial Navigators as points of rendezvous.

The question of their mission was on everyone's lips.

Beneath the solar dome at the top of the great tower was a magnificent reception hall. Pillars of red marble mined from the fiery lands of Baal's equatorial regions ranged from floor to ceiling, holding up veils of silk that were finely worked with intricate detail. The hanging banners were battle records, showing every engagement the Blood Angels had fought, from the final skirmishes on Terra during the twilight of the Unification Wars, through two centuries of the Great Crusade to the present day.

As he entered the chamber, Captain Raldoron searched the hangings and found the newest threading of words: *Kayvas Belt*. He smiled grimly. The servitors had wasted no time in committing the name of the mission to the cloth, almost as if they were just as impatient as he was to put it to rest, and move on to greater glories.

He skirted the pillars, crossing over the outer edge of the tiled floor. He glanced down and saw the familiar shapes of Terra and Baal, a relief of the two planets laid one atop the other. For now, Baal was in the ascendant, the photonic tiles showing the eastern hemisphere of his home world as if lit by a warm sun. The Chalice Mountains and the Great Sear passed beneath his boots as he walked, and in a small way he felt a sense of reconnection with his place of birth. Terra peered out over the shoulder of Baal, its scarred and city-bound surface visible as if it were an eclipsed moon. The mosaic seemed fixed and static, but that was an illusion. The closer the *Red Tear* came to Terra across the galactic plane, the more the planet would wax while Baal waned, and vice-versa. For now, they were nearer home, and that sat well with Raldoron.

In the centre of the chamber were the rest of the captains from the companies of the Three Hundred present in the fleet. Each of them met his gaze as he passed, greeting him with a respectful jut of the chin or a brisk salute. He returned each with the same nod. Raldoron was a veteran captain just as they were, but he was commander of the First, and his promotion to Chapter Master placed him in a special class of seniority that few other warriors of the Legion could claim. He wore the honour with pride and humility, as was the Blood Angels way, but the captain knew it forever set him apart from his fellows.

Perhaps that was just as well; Raldoron had never been an outgoing, gregarious spirit. He saw himself as a simple soul, a warrior with a calling to fight for his primarch and his Emperor. What was there to say or to doubt about that?

He slowed as he spotted three of his battle-brothers engaged in a spirited discussion, catching the edges of their conversation.

Captain Nakir, the commander of the 24th, was talking to Furio of the Ninth. The pair of them were stark contrasts, and both distant in their own ways from the typical model of a Blood Angel. Nakir was of technomad stock, his shoulder-length hair black and plaited, his swarthy face forever caught between a killer's smile and a zealot's grimace; meanwhile, Furio stood a little taller and wider than

the other captain. Some joked that he would be better suited to wear the Cataphractii armour of the Terminator squads instead of the standard warplate that seemed hard-pressed to encompass his stature. Furio's hairless head was pale, showing his origins as an iceborn from Baal's northern polar zone.

Nakir and Furio were addressing a third officer, and even from the back Raldoron knew immediately that it was Amit, captain of the Fifth. Like Nakir and his comrade, Raldoron's power armour was in good order and dressed in a manner befitting the summit that was about to take place. The First Captain had paused before ascending to the dome in order to gather up his power sword and ceremonial scabbard for such occasions. It seemed fitting; whatever the outcome, a campaign had just ended and that was cause for observance and adherence to protocol. They were not meeting in some rubble-strewn bunker in the midst of an all-out war; this was on their terms, in their domain.

Amit, however, did not consider that important. His armour was the same duty gear he had worn throughout the Kayvas conflict, the artificer-wrought superiority of it still visible, but layered with impact marks, blade scratches and other signifiers of battle-worn hardware. It mirrored the martial bluntness of the warrior who wore it.

'Could you not have serviced your armour before arriving, brother?' Nakir was asking.

Amit shrugged. His perpetual grimace peered through his sandy beard and close-cropped hair. 'I came from the practice cages. Before that I was shooting orks off the hull of a frigate. I did not have the time.' The last he said with sly relish.

'You know what a polish cloth looks like, don't you?' Furio said, raising an eyebrow. 'I could show you.'

The captain of the Fifth frowned and leaned in to look at Furio's armour, feigning a look of confusion. 'How strange…' He pointed at the shining red ceramite cladding the other legionary. 'For a moment there, your mail? I could have sworn the colours of it were purple and gold, not crimson.'

Nakir laughed. 'As hard as he tries, Furio will never be as pretty as one of Fulgrim's dandies.'

Furio snorted. 'I agree that our primarch did not grant me the totality of his noble aspect, but he did reward me with the depth of his battle acumen.' He looked up as Raldoron came closer. 'And I am sure the First Captain will assert this truth with me; the plain fact is that the Blood Angels are the most handsome of the Legiones Astartes.'

'Polished armour or not,' added Amit, with a rare, brief smile.

'I'm no judge of such things,' Raldoron replied. 'I'm just a simple soldier.'

Nakir cocked his head. 'We are none of us simple soldiers, captain.'

'Perhaps not,' Raldoron allowed.

He turned to find Amit watching him. Of all the Legion captains, Amit's reputation – and that of his company – was the most bloodthirsty. More than once, the Fifth had been called to censure for their zeal in pursuing enemy forces. It was not for nothing that the outspoken officer had earned the nickname 'the Flesh Tearer', and rather than deny the epithet, he had made it his own. The other officer had a predatory way about him, a sense of aggression barely held in check that Raldoron had seen unleashed in full many times on the field of battle. 'Do you know?' he said.

The First Captain did not need to ask what Amit meant. It was the question on all their minds. *Where are we going next?* Raldoron frowned. 'I have not been told. That's why we are here, so we may all learn that answer at once.'

'The primarch is on his way,' said Furio. 'I saw Guard Sergeant Zuriel heading to his chambers to

accompany him.'

'If it was up to the Sanguinary Guard, the Angel would never be allowed to leave his quarters.' Nakir snorted. 'Azkaellon walks as if that gold armour of his makes him the better of the rest of us.'

Raldoron did not disagree with the sentiment, but it was not seemly to allow even the smallest seed of divisiveness to take root here. He gave Nakir a hard look. 'Azkaellon, Zuriel and the others all have their duties to perform, just as we do. They deserve our respect.'

'I say only what I see,' Nakir replied, after a moment.

'Not here,' Raldoron told him. 'Not today. We'll have no cap-badge rivalry in our ranks.'

'I have heard rumours about our new destination,' Furio said, interceding to bring the conversation back to the matter at hand. 'It is said that the Warmaster is planning a major new offensive several sectors distant.'

'And you know this how?' asked Amit, doubt clear in his tone.

'The astropathic choirs,' explained Furio. 'Their communications are sometimes imprecise. Other signals bleed in. Data on other expeditionary fleets becomes known.'

Raldoron said nothing. He too had heard the same hearsay, spoken by crewmen when they believed that he was out of earshot. Ships from several Legions, by some reports as many as six, were being called to Horus's side – and with them, their primarchs. The First Captain tried to imagine what kind of enemy would require that scale of task force. Two or three of the Emperor's sons fighting side by side was a rarity. More meant a threat of great scale in the offing.

He glanced at the representation of the planets beneath his feet. 'Perhaps it is not a matter of war at all. Perhaps we are being gathered for a different reason. To follow the Emperor's path back to Terra.'

'We are not going to the Sol system, captain.' A woman's voice, pitched and clear like the ring of fine crystal, came to his ears. Raldoron turned and gave a small bow as the *Red Tear*'s shipmistress came towards them. Her retinue – a pair of Imperial Army officers and a female remembrancer carrying a small picter – walked warily behind her, trying not to appear cowed by the numbers of hulking figures surrounding them.

For her part, Admiral Athene DuCade appeared unconcerned by the warrior host in the chamber. She was tiny in comparison to Raldoron, but he had once heard a veteran describe her as 'a maid cast out of iron'. Any legionary could have gathered her up in his arms and broken her in two like a bundle of dry twigs, but she radiated a majesty that the First Captain had only encountered on rare occasions. Nothing, from the largest enemy battle force to the most brutal engagement, seemed to faze the woman. Behind cool, blue eyes there was a tactician's intellect that he found challenging. When Admiral DuCade spoke, even the Angel would listen – and that alone granted her a rare level of respect not often shown to those outside the Legion. Sanguinius had personally selected her to command his flagship, and she had done so as long as Raldoron had been a legionary.

He studied her lined, poised face. It was difficult for him to estimate her age; she seemed never to alter, decade after decade, kept timeless by juvenat treatments. Raldoron had no image of his birth-mother, growing up an orphan after his family had perished in a razor-storm, but he wondered if she would have looked like DuCade.

'Thank you for joining us, admiral,' said Nakir. 'How goes the fleet?'

'Well, captain,' she replied. 'We are at optimal fighting strength. The campaign's casualties have been addressed. I think we all agree that we are ready to move on to the next deployment.'

‘And not so much as a thank you from the Alpha Legion,’ Furio said mildly. ‘It’s like they never needed us at all…’

‘If not Terra, then where?’ Amit broke in, unwilling to see the subject of the conversation drift. ‘Will we join the *Ignis* task force at Nartaba?’

The admiral glanced at the other Blood Angel. ‘No. It is my understanding that the mission against the eldar reavers in the Nartaba system is at an end. The battleship *Ignis* and her flotilla will come to us. A rendezvous point is already being prepared.’

‘And then?’ said Nakir.

DuCade gave a wan smile. ‘Your guess is as good as mine, captain. The primarch has not yet chosen to share his plans beyond that point with me.’ She was going to say more, but then one of the men at her side stiffened.

The admiral’s aide had an augmetic implant on the right side of his face that stretched from the temple down to the jaw line, a device of brass and polished silver. Raldoron recognised the form of a wireless vox-mechanism within it, and his enhanced hearing picked up a faint whine from the implant – the vibration of an echo-communiqué transmitted into the officer’s mastoid by bone induction.

‘Major?’ DuCade saw the reaction and gave her man a level look.

‘A contact, ma’am,’ said the aide, looking blankly into the middle distance as he repeated what he was hearing. ‘Our scout ships at the head of the fleet report a single Imperial vessel of cruiser tonnage on an intercept vector. It was likely waiting for us beyond the mass shadow of the belt, at the Mandeville point.’

‘Such poor timing…’ muttered Nakir.

‘What pennants?’ she demanded. ‘Name and squadron?’

‘Interrogation signals show it is the *Dark Page*, in service with the XVII Legion Astartes.’

Amit’s brow furrowed. ‘Lorgar’s Word Bearers? Who thought to invite them?’

Raldoron was already tapping the vox-bead in the neck-ring of his armour, switching to the intra-fleet communications frequency as the major spoke again.

‘We are now receiving a machine-call signal from the vessel. Code protocols concur.’

The First Captain listened in on the message and his expression grew grave. ‘They say they have come to speak to the Angel. They bring an emissary from the Warmaster.’

The Sanguinary Guard were waiting for Raldoron when he reached the primarch’s chambers. Zuriel, Guard Sergeant and second-in-command of the detachment, was giving orders to his battle-brother Lohgos.

‘You and Halkryn stand to sunward,’ he told the other Guardian. ‘Mendrion and I will cover the master at shadowline.’

Lohgos saluted with his fist to his chest, the gauntlet-mounted bolter affixed there clanking against his armour. He gave Raldoron a noncommittal glance and moved off.

Zuriel stepped into his path. ‘The matter is in hand, First Captain.’

‘No doubt,’ Raldoron replied. ‘But as Chapter Master, I should hear this Word Bearer’s utterances. I have a hundred battle captains who will need to know what the Warmaster’s orders are. Better they hear it from me.’

The Guard Sergeant nodded. ‘As you wish. The party from the *Dark Page* have docked in the secondary bay. They’ll be here shortly.’

The ornate doors of the primarch's quarters opened and Raldoron stepped through, his eyes falling on Sanguinius before anything else.

His liege lord wore his duty armour, gold and white platinum with a bronze mail cloak that lay draped over his folded wings. It was not as ornate as the high artificer armour he would wear into combat, but still it seemed barely able to contain the full radiance of the primarch. Raldoron had once heard one of the remembrancers say that Sanguinius shone like a star carved into the shape of a man, and he could not fault that description.

The primarch saw the First Captain and nodded briefly, beckoning him. 'Ral, good. You've saved me the trouble of summoning you.' He crossed the chamber's atrium, passing under the pools of soft light cast from floating lume-globes overhead. The glow spilled off his elaborate armour, illuminating paintings and other artworks arrayed across the walls with splashes of colour.

Raldoron and Zuriel dropped to one knee on the polished stone floor and bowed their heads. 'Your will, my lord?' said the captain.

The Angel gestured for them to stand, and as Zuriel and the other gold-armoured bodyguards took up their assigned positions, the captain came a few steps closer. Sanguinius was much taller than him, but he did not tower over the officer, not in a way that made him feel he was inferior. The Lord of the Blood Angels seemed able to stand on level ground with his sons, even though the reality was otherwise. 'I dreamed of you, my friend,' said Sanguinius. 'Some nights ago, while I meditated on our crusade.'

'I… am honoured,' said Raldoron, meaning every word. The ways of the Emperor's sons were complex and often far beyond the understanding of others – even men raised to transhuman power like those of the Legions – and it was known that some of them possessed abilities that appeared to defy logic. There were many stories: that Mortarion of the Death Guard was incapable of feeling pain, that Corax could cloud the minds of men with but a thought or that the Khan could talk to storms… These were a strange intertwining of living myth and cold truth, and when one was speaking of beings like the primarchs it was impossible to say where fact ended and fiction began. The Angel had *the sight*, so it was said, and nothing that Raldoron had ever seen or heard in his years as a legionary had ever made him doubt it. On rare occasions, at times of the greatest import, Sanguinius would intervene in the operations of the Legion, apparently without reason, but always with great effect. Lives would be saved, defeat avoided, traps found. And it was recorded that he would sometimes give a boon to a warrior – a glimpse of their own destiny revealed to him through the complex weave of fate.

As a young scout, Raldoron had heard this story from the old Master of Neophytes and wondered what such a thing would mean. Now, more than a century later, he was learning the answer.

Sanguinius nodded. 'I saw you on Baal. You were in the caverns beneath the fortress-monastery. You were…'

For the briefest of instants, the primarch's face clouded, but then the moment was gone and Raldoron wondered if he had imagined it. 'You were filled with pride.'

The captain was at a loss for the right words. Finally, he found an answer. 'I have always been proud to be a son of Sanguinius, lord.'

'And I am pleased to count you among my Legion.' The primarch gave him an easy grin. 'You are my strong right arm, Ral.'

'They come!' Zuriel called out, forestalling any more conversation.

In the middle of the antechamber, a square of flagstones dropped into a recess and then came apart,

each retracting away into the floor space below like the pieces of a tessellate puzzle. From the open shaft revealed beneath a platform rose up, floating on a heat-haze ripple of anti-grav force. The elevator drew level with the deck and halted; standing upon it were four Blood Angels wearing the gold heraldry of the Sanguinary Guard, at parade-ground attention with their bolters held at arms. As one, they went to their knees and repeated the same bow Raldoron had given moments before.

Three figures stood in the centre of the platform, and they too gave Sanguinius his due deference. Two of them were Space Marines, in dark armour heavily detailed with lines of text carved into the ceramite sheath, the sigil of a burning book upon their pauldrons. The Word Bearers went unhooded, and they bowed low from the waist. Both men had lengthy dreadlocks that tumbled down over their gorgets, the hair ringed with devotional clasps and twists of gold wire.

The last of the new arrivals was an unnaturally tall female clad from head to foot in robes of a strange, sheer material the colour of gunmetal. Raldoron's first thought was that she might have been a descendant from one of the null-gee colonies where humans grew willowy and weak of bone in the microgravity; but such beings would be confined to support frames on board any ship with a Terran-normal environment. The sketch of her face was visible through the dark muslin-like cloth, as were the curves of her spindly body, her bony shoulders and small breasts. Raldoron raised an eyebrow as he realised that beneath the shapeless robes she wore nothing else.

One of the Word Bearers, a white-haired veteran wearing a banner of parchment over his arm like a half-cloak, took a step forwards. 'Honoured Sanguinius,' he began, his voice rough. 'I am Chaplain Tanus Kreed, ranked Acolyte of Lorgar and commander of the *Dark Page*.' He gestured to the warrior at his side. 'My second, Captain Uan Harox.'

Harox bobbed his head. The captain's armour also sported long strips of oath-paper falling from bright scarlet seals on his chest plate. His hair was rust-red and Raldoron saw that he had no organic eyes; instead a single mechanical vision slit had been surgically mounted in his skull.

'The woman is Mamzel Corocoro Sahzë of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.'

'An astropath?' said Sanguinius.

She performed a complex, balletic curtsey. 'Glory to you and your Legion, Great Angel.' Her voice had a peculiar, musical quality to it.

'I welcome my brother's cohorts to the *Red Tear*,' said the primarch, dismissing the honour guards with a glance. 'But I must say, you were not expected. A day later and you would have found us gone. My fleet is in the midst of preparing for travel into the warp.'

'Fortune, then,' said Kreed, stepping off the elevator platform with Harox and Sahzë trailing behind him. 'The Warmaster dispatched us at the most opportune moment.'

'Horus does have a good sense of timing, that's always been so,' Sanguinius allowed, sharing a look with Raldoron. 'But I find it interesting that you are here within a heartbeat of our campaign ending at Kayvas. I wonder if Alpharius has been as quiet as he appears.'

Kreed cocked his head. 'I know nothing of that, my lord. I was ceded to the Warmaster's command by Lord Aurelian and I am here on his order.'

'Horus has sent me a Chaplain?' The Angel considered the thought. 'What do you make of that, First Captain?'

'With respect to our guests, the Blood Angels have no need of one,' Raldoron said immediately. The acolytes of the Word Bearers had been sent to many fleets, placed in several of the Legions in the months that unfolded after the passing of the Nikaea edict. The suspension of psychic warfare and the

abolition of the Librarius contingent had been dealt with differently in each Legion that maintained one, each according to their individual traditions and methods. In a service offered by Lorgar to his brethren, the master of the XVII Legion had sent his most pious and vigilant apostles to help with the re-integration of those gifted with psyker powers back into the rank and file of the Space Marine cohorts.

No help from the Word Bearers had been requested or required by the Blood Angels, however. The black-armoured Wardens, their roles already embedded in the Legion proper, took on the task of policing the reformation.

'Ah, yes,' said Harox, speaking for the first time. 'Of course. You have your own.' He glanced at Raldoron, as if he were attempting to intuit his thoughts.

'My Wardens are not the same as Lorgar's Chaplains,' Sanguinius stated, matter-of-factly.

'Indeed,' said Kreed, 'and the role of my granted office is not the issue at hand, my lord. I am here as the steward of a message for you, Lord Sanguinius.' At that, the woman sauntered forwards.

'Not that I would denigrate the powers of the mamzel,' said the primarch, 'but the *Red Tear's* astropathic choir is the finest in this sector. Any communication Horus wishes to send to me they could pluck from the tides of the void and deliver in kind.'

Raldoron watched as Kreed slowly shook his head. 'No, my lord. That is not so. Great Horus stipulated to me with no uncertainty that Sahzë alone will be the conduit of this message, and that his orders in this were ironclad.'

The Angel's manner cooled. 'Those were my brother's exact words?'

'No, lord,' replied Kreed. 'Those were your *Warmaster's* words.'

Raldoron glanced at Zuriel and saw the same questions on the Sanguinary Guard's face as were doubtless visible on his own.

'Far be it from me to defy the Warmaster,' said Sanguinius, without weight. 'Lady? Come forwards, if you will.'

'I cannot,' she trilled. 'For I too am under the strictest of the Warmaster's instructions.' Sahzë extended a long arm and cast around the antechamber, taking in Zuriel's men, Raldoron and the Word Bearers. 'They must leave us.'

Zuriel's jaw set. 'We are the Sanguinary Guard. We will not leave our lord alone with an unknown witch!'

Sahzë continued as if the Guard Sergeant had not spoken. 'Horus Lupercal's message is for his brother's eyes only. The meme-blocks in my psyche and the telepathic codes holding my aura closed will only dissolve…' She released a sigh, gazing dreamily at the primarch. 'When we are alone.'

Sanguinius was like marble for the longest moment, his face unreadable. Then his expression shifted, returning to his easy aspect. 'Do as she says, Zuriel. Take your warriors and wait outside.' He turned to Raldoron. 'Captain, please ensure our guests are accommodated while I deal with this matter.'

Raldoron came closer, lowering his voice. 'My lord, are you–'

'*Certain*,' Sanguinius told him, in a tone that would brook no argument.

Reluctantly, the First Captain gave a bow and turned away. Kreed and Harox fell in step with him, and a few paces behind, Zuriel and the Sanguinary Guard followed suit.

'This is against protocol,' muttered Lohgos under his breath. 'If he were here, Azkaellon would never allow it.'

‘You are fearful over nothing, brother,’ Raldoron heard Halkryn reply. ‘These are our allies. There’s no threat here, and that girl is just a wisp of a thing.’

Lohgos’s reply was frosty. ‘Is she?’

The antechamber’s doors closed with a low ring of metal on metal, and Sanguinius approached the astropath. She could not remain still, shifting on her feet as if being acted upon by a breath of wind that touched only her.

The primarch reached out and raised her chin with his fingertips, making her meet his gaze. ‘You’re a curious one,’ he offered. ‘What has made my brother send you to me, mamzel?’

‘I would not like to guess,’ she breathed, fingering a silver clasp upon her robes.

‘No?’

‘I am not privy to the thoughts of godlings.’

The Angel chuckled. ‘We are not gods, he and I. But in a poor light one might mistake us as so.’

‘Such contradiction in those words, great one,’ said Sahzë. ‘*I am not divine*, sayeth the angel.’ She reached out, daring to touch the trailing edge of his folded wings beneath the mail cloak.

Sanguinius allowed the imposition, but then stepped back to give her room. ‘I am, like Horus and all my kin, as my father made me. Born of science and learning, not of mythology.’

‘The Emperor made you an angel,’ said the astropath, her voice echoing in the empty room. ‘Why? Did he make a devil as well?’

‘Have you met my brother Magnus?’ he replied, with a wry smile.

Sahzë folded her arms to her chest, her hands playing at her thin, elegant neck. Her every motion seemed performed, as if it were a step in some long, expressive dance. ‘Did your father give you wings and fair aspect to show his mastery? To prove to the galaxy that he was superior to every dream of seraphs?’

The woman’s words had brought the primarch a moment of amusement, but that now faded. ‘You are here to give me a message,’ Sanguinius told her. ‘Deliver it.’

‘As you wish.’ Sahzë’s long fingers pulled at the folds of her robes and the cloth unwrapped itself from around her, falling from her thin shoulders to gather in a shimmering, silken pool at her feet. Her pale, hairless flesh was ivory and unblemished.

With exaggerated care, the astropath dropped to the floor and gathered herself into a crouching, hunched form. Sanguinius’s acute senses felt a sudden drop in temperature around her, and a rime of frost sparkled into being over Sahzë’s skin. She snorted, puffs of white vapour escaping her nostrils, and began to tremble. But not from the cold.

Above her, motes of strange light gathered, emitting out of the air itself. The primarch smelled a sulphurous, electric tang. His thoughts racing, he spoke quickly into his vox. ‘Priority,’ he said quietly. ‘Isolate the astropathic choir in their sanctum chamber immediately. Seal them in and do not open it again until I give the order.’

Sanguinius cut the link without waiting for a reply. He could perceive the sudden plume of energy collecting around the woman, feeling the pressure of it on the edges of his more ephemeral senses – and such a discharge of psychic power might easily wreak havoc with the delicate minds of the *Red Tear*’s astropaths.

Sahzë gave an agonised cry that drew him back to her, and the woman’s head snapped upwards with an audible click. In an explosive flood, streamers of thick, churning mist burst from her open

mouth, her nostrils, ears and eyes.

The primarch's hand dropped to the infernus pistol holstered at his waist and hesitated there. This was no manner of psychic communication he was familiar with.

A piercing psychic shriek cut through his thoughts and then melted away into silence. The mist resembled thick, milky fluid flowing through clear oil, but by turns it began to coalesce into a more solid, defined structure. Sanguinius's eyes widened as the shape became the vaguest suggestion of a human. It grew more distinct with each passing second, gaining layers of detail and nuance.

The ectoplasmic cloud coagulated into a familiar form, and then it spoke. 'Well met, brother.' The timbre of the words was distorted, as if they were coming through water, the low tones resonating, but it was without doubt the voice of the Warmaster.

Sanguinius's eyes flicked to Sahzë, who writhed silently in the throes of a psyker trance, then back to the apparition. 'Horus?' he asked, studying the smoke-shape. 'What is this?'

'The woman is extremely gifted,' said his brother. 'And her abilities have been… enhanced by those with unique knowledge.'

'How is this done?' The Angel slowly circled the trembling, naked woman. 'She is a… a conduit? That is not possible…'

The Horus-image turned to follow him. 'Clearly it is, Sanguinius. Hurling psychic shouts into the void and hoping they will be heard is but one method of contact over interstellar distances.'

'The *only* method.'

'Not so,' Horus corrected. 'Sahzë's rare gift is what you see at work here. She can forge a direct line of contact through the warp, becoming the passage between us as easily as if we were speaking over a vox-channel. She is mind-bonded to another, who is before me now.'

'Incredible,' Sanguinius admitted. 'This is of father's creation?'

'He is occupied with his great work on Terra.' Horus gave a curt shake of the head. 'I have learned a lot myself, brother, especially in these recent weeks. New possibilities are opening up before me.' He nodded to himself. 'For all of us.'

'I am impressed,' said the Angel. 'But I would counsel caution with such things. Remember how the Emperor looked gravely upon the Thousand Sons for their experiments with the immaterium.'

Horus's face rippled and shifted, making his expressions hard to read. 'Magnus was foolish. He kept his aims concealed from father. I will never do that. The Emperor will always know what I intend.' The Warmaster's phantom loomed larger, the shapes of his battle armour becoming visible as he moved. Even this simulacrum served to carry his great presence across the light years without diminishing it. 'A question occurs to me, Sanguinius. As I stand here upon the deck of the *Vengeful Spirit* with my warriors at my hand and the end of the Great Crusade on the horizon… I think of our doubts.'

'I have none,' the Angel answered without hesitation. 'This cause is as just as it has ever been, my brother. We bring light to those in need of illumination, we are following in our father's glorious footsteps. You know that.'

'I know that,' Horus echoed, and for a moment he almost seemed disappointed. 'I do. I know our Emperor's desire, for an ordered galaxy with his rule upon it.'

'It is what we are born for.' Sanguinius paused, concern etching his features. It was difficult to interpret the ghost-image of his brother, but he could sense a distance between them that was not just physical. 'Horus, what troubles you? Is something amiss? Is that why you wished to speak to me

alone?'

His answer came slowly, but with certainty. 'I am untroubled, brother. Do not concern yourself for me.' He gestured towards Sanguinius, wraith-like fingers reaching out. 'I have new orders for the Blood Angels. An important mission that will require the full might of your armies.'

'You wish me to commit my entire Legion to a single objective?'

Horus nodded, the image blurring. 'Yes, and you will need the strength of every one of your sons. I have learned that a cluster of worlds in the Northern Cross, out on the Fringe, have severed all lines of contact with Terra and the Imperium. These worlds are key colonies in that region, a lynch-pin system vitally important to the protection of the outer sectors, and of critical strategic importance to the Great Crusade.'

'Invasion?' said Sanguinius. 'Or insurrection?'

'Both,' the Warmaster replied. 'My intelligencers believe that the planetary governors have willingly surrendered their authority and their military to the rule of a xenos trespasser.' He fixed his brother with a hard eye. 'You know them well, Sanguinius. We faced them together on the deserts of Melchior. The alien tyrants who call themselves the nephilim.'

For an instant, the primarch was struck silent. Then he shook his head, his brow furrowing. 'The nephilim are *extinct*,' he insisted. 'We culled them by the million on Melchior! Their home world was razed by the White Scars. Jaghatai looked me in the eyes and told me it was done!'

'It appears that the Khan and his warriors were too quick to mark the grave of these hateful creatures. Clearly, the V Legion were not as thorough as we believed. Some survived, and now they have returned to plague the Imperium.'

'I would not have thought the White Scars capable of such an error…' Sanguinius's frown deepened. It was difficult to conceive that Jaghatai Khan and his hordes would have left even *one* nephilim alive after their assault.

'Go to the Eastern Fringe,' Horus insisted, 'and finish the deed once and for all. Take your Legion and exterminate whatever you find there.'

'And the colonies?'

Horus became grave. 'Do what you can. But it may already be too late for the colonies and their populations. If so, they are to be considered enemy combatants. Do not seek surrender or accept capitulation, Sanguinius. There can only be death… but with all your sons by your side, I am confident that these aliens and their lickspittle worshippers will be utterly destroyed.'

The Angel considered the Warmaster's words. 'That is your order?'

'Aye,' echoed the distant voice. 'You will take Kreed and the *Dark Page* with you on this duty. They will observe, and when all is done, return to me with the final word of it.'

'We have a delegation of remembrancers in the fleet… Perhaps they should be sent elsewhere.'

'Keep them with you,' Horus told him. 'They will serve their purpose.'

Sanguinius turned over the command in his thoughts. Horus's demand was that the Blood Angels serve as the edge of the axe, sweeping in across space to destroy all that lay before them. It was an act they were capable of, of that there was no doubt, but it seemed a crude use of their capability. 'I will do as my Warmaster asks, if that is his wish,' said the primarch. 'My other fleets are close by and I can gather them to my side in short order. But I cannot proceed without a question.'

'Ask it,' Horus demanded.

'Why have you chosen the Blood Angels for this endeavour?' Sanguinius tried to search the face of

the apparition for some degree of meaning, but the smoky image did not hold under his scrutiny. ‘Surely the Wolves of Russ or Angron’s World Eaters would be better suited to such a punitive campaign? My Legion are not executioners.’

‘You are what your Warmaster tells you to be,’ came the terse reply. Horus paused, then spoke again, moderating his tone. ‘You wish to know why I sent you the woman Sahzë, why I wanted to keep this conversation most secret?’

The odour of human sweat and seared flesh reached the primarch, and Sanguinius glanced at the astropath. She was rocking back and forth, vomiting up the thick strings of mist, buried in the depths of her trance. He saw strange traceries beneath the surface of her skin, bright lines like fire burning deep in the pale meat of her, crosses piled upon crosses, stars and circles. He saw this, and on some level he was disquieted.

‘It is because of a vow I made to you.’ Horus’s words drew his attention away. ‘On Melchior, in the sunken ruin of an alien chapel. I told you I would do all I could to help you deal with… your *lost*. No matter how long it took.’

Sanguinius became very still. ‘I remember.’

‘A secret truth was discovered in the ruins of the nephilim home world. The xenos control human minds, that we have always known. But they possess a technology capable of manipulating the structure of the brain. Something that can reach into the very depths of a man’s mind and excise the darkness bred into him. Do you understand, my brother? They have a key, these creatures. It may be the very solution you have been searching for. A way to undo the flaw.’ He nodded. ‘I know you have not halted in your private quest for a solution.’

‘Yes,’ Sanguinius said, feeling an echo of the terrible burden upon him once more. ‘And we have found nothing. Even now, my Guard Commander returns from Nartaba Octus after a fruitless hunt.’ He looked away for a moment. The primarch had sent Azkaellon to the planet beset by eldar pirates to seek out a lost bio-relical, but there had been nothing to find but ruins. It preyed on him to keep these matters from his sons, but there were always burdens a father had to carry alone.

‘Obey my command in this,’ Horus told him, ‘and I promise you that the Blood Angels will find a new freedom.’

At last, Sanguinius drew himself up and gave the salute of the aquila to the phantom image of his brother. ‘I obey, Warmaster,’ he said. ‘Where are we bound?’

The face in the smoke smiled. ‘A star system called Signus.’

THREE

Of the Bloodline
Wolves
Drowning in Ashes

The pace of the warrior's bare feet slapping against the cold metal decking was a metronome, measuring out the passage of time as he circled the length of the *Hermia*'s gun gallery.

The Blood Angel ran at a pace that would have matched the cruise of an Mastodon troop carrier over even ground, his training fatigues snapping at his limbs. Across his back he carried a metal frame loaded with iron discs, counterbalance weights borrowed from the crews of the heavy ballistic launcher carriages arrayed far below the platform of the gallery. There were thick cowls around his wrists and ankles, filled with dense osmium powder. They dragged on him, simulating the load of a full suit of Mark II power armour, but with none of the strength-enhancing systems or internal temperature control mechanisms. Still, the warrior's sheen of chem-engineered sweat kept him cool, allowing him to maintain his velocity as he approached the bow of the *Hermia* and the midpoint of the gun gallery.

Raised up high over the bow of the starship, the gallery was part of the pre-Crusade design of the vessel. Formerly a space where gunnery officers could take visual sight readings and sensor gear could be housed, advances in technology by the Mechanicum priesthood had made such uses obsolete – and after the cruiser's most recent refit, the kilometres-long platform had been remade. Aside from the *Hermia*'s main spinal corridor, it was the longest passageway on the ship, and for the most part it was empty. One side of the gantry looked down into the hull spaces where the bow guns and Geller field arrays rested, the other out through panels of armourglass into deep space, the crimson flanks of the starship dropping away beneath.

The Blood Angel saw the turn coming and upped his speed into a sudden sprint. He wanted to finish his run before the *Hermia* completed its escape burn from the edges of the Nartaba system, before it moved into interstellar space and ventured into the warp. Elsewhere on the ship, his battle-brothers were already preparing their armour and weapons for the coming mission. His commander, Brother-Sergeant Cassiel, had ordered a mandatory equipment review, and the squad leader was notorious for his exacting attention to the smallest detail. The rest of the unit – Sarga, Leyteo, Xagan and the others – would be hard at work under his hawkish scrutiny, stripping their bolters down to the frame and working at their warplate with lapping powder. His armour was still in the hands of the Legion serfs, however, the repairs to its damaged chest plate taking longer than had been expected.

Thinking of the damage caused the wound to flare with pain once more. As he twisted into his run, turning across the bow, the rough-edged diamond of scar tissue on his belly tightened. It jabbed him with pain, enough to make him wince and, for a moment, drop off his pace.

At the same instant, he saw a figure in the lee of a curved support beam, a man leaning forwards on

the battlement-like grids that had once housed macroscopes and laser-rangers. The warrior came to a halt, moderating his breathing, and his hand fell to his scar.

'Still healing, is it?' said the man. He smiled nervously and then pointed at the legionary. 'The cut, I mean.' His voice had a sing-song intonation to it, similar to the accents of the Keltian Colonials.

'What do you know of it?' demanded the Blood Angel. The man's words seemed like an imposition; his face was unfamiliar, but the clothes he wore made it clear that he wasn't any sort of naval crewman or Legion serf. The data-slate in his hand was an elaborate civilian model, with folding lenses on retractable arms and a stylus on a bronze chain. A remembrancer, then, he decided. There were a handful of them among the ships of the task force, although most remained in a billet on the fleet's command ship, the *Ignis*.

'I know who you are, my lord. Brother Meros, of the Ninth Company's exalted bloodline. If you don't mind me saying, you're a subject of some interest.'

Meros took a step closer. 'Whose interest?'

The remembrancer retreated in kind, his cheeks flushing red as he finally understood he was presuming too much. 'I mean no disrespect. But the story about you on Nartaba Octus… Well, me and my fellow artists came to hear of it, and I being the one here on the *Hermia*…' His voice trailed off and he swallowed hard. 'You fought off a pack of eldar reavers alone. One lone Apothecary against a troop of them, all to save a dozen people at the Octus outpost.'

'That was duty,' Meros said, with a sniff. 'Nothing to make a story out of.'

'If you'll pardon my presumption, my lord, but that's for me to decide, not you.' He gave a slight bow, flicking unkempt brown hair out of his pale eyes. 'I'm Halerdyce Gerwyn, remembrancer-at-large by the Emperor's decree. Recorder of tales and such.' He retraced his steps, closing in on Meros once again. 'And that duty you spoke of? Taking a fatal round in your gut there and living to talk about it, to run around these passages? Coming back from the very embrace of death? That's a fine story indeed. Stirring, I'd even say.'

Something about the man's manner amused Meros, but he kept that hidden. 'Would you not rather be remembering tales of greater men than I? Primarchs and the like?' He nodded at the walls. 'Azkaellon, the Commander of the Sanguinary Guard, is aboard this ship. I would think posterity would rather know the deeds of a hero of his stature than a lowly legionary like me.'

Gerwyn snapped his fingers. 'Ah, that's where you'd be wrong. The Great Crusade is as much about the single soldier as it is about the exalted commander.' He paused. 'At least, I feel it to be so.' He gestured with his data-slate. 'And if I could confide a truth to you, my lord? Your man Azkaellon frightens me some. He prowls this ship like he's hunting something.'

'It's not you,' Meros told Gerwyn, 'so be at ease.' Still, the remembrancer's words struck a chord with the Apothecary. The Guard Commander's presence in the fleet was unusual and his actions during the Nartaba sortie had only done more to give question to what he was doing there. Meros had heard barrack-room hearsay of how the Sanguinary Guard had refused to become involved in the defence of the Octus science colony, instead disappearing into the wilds with no word of explanation. But then again, a warrior of Azkaellon's rank did not need to explain himself to anyone but the primarch himself.

All this he kept to himself, seeing no reason to fuel the remembrancer's need for more grist to his fiction's mill. Another thought occurred to him. 'You were up here watching me.'

'No!' Gerwyn insisted. 'Well, yes. And no.'

‘Which is it?’ Meros folded his arms, eyeing the slim man coldly.

‘I’ve been coming up here since the start,’ he said. ‘It’s quiet, isn’t it? And a gorgeous view.’ Gerwyn nodded at the windows. Beyond the armourglass, the lines of the mighty battleship *Ignis* were visible, the vessel a huge hammerhead of crimson and obsidian a few kilometres off the starboard bow. ‘And when I heard you were running the corridor…’ He shrugged. ‘Look, my–’

The Blood Angel held up a hand. ‘Just Meros will do. Don’t saddle me with titles.’

‘Uh. Aye, Meros, then.’ Gerwyn swallowed once more. ‘I didn’t intend to intrude. Well, perhaps a little. But not so it would bother you. I wanted to write the story.’

‘Show me.’ Meros held out his hand, indicating the slate.

‘It’s not done yet,’ said the remembrancer, reluctant to hand over the device. Instead, he held it up to show the warrior a set of narrative panels, each a small picture accompanied by a block of text below it. The first was a fanciful representation of a Blood Angel in the white and red armour of a Legion Apothecary, a bolter in one hand and a chainaxe in the other, facing a wall of feral, night-clad eldar. ‘I’m a sequentialist,’ Gerwyn explained, the words spilling out of him. ‘A bit of a scribe, a bit of an artist, the best of the both. I know some look down their noses at my craft, think it’s not so grand as those who write operas or chip away at marble, but I’ll warrant more people read these serials across the Imperium than you’d know…’

The Apothecary kept his expression neutral, studying the pictures. Another panel was a close-up of the fictional warrior’s face and it was a passable rendition of Meros’s careworn aspect, but cast in a fanciful and overly heroic light. ‘I don’t disapprove,’ he said, ‘but keep your work on the right side of truth, remembrancer.’

‘Of course!’ Gerwyn nodded happily. ‘I’ll have a copy printed and bound for you when it is complete.’

‘No need,’ Meros told him, turning to walk away. ‘I was there. I remember.’ He paused, and tapped the place where the scar sat on his flesh. ‘I already have my own record of that day.’

When Gerwyn spoke again, the brisk manner he had shown before was gone. ‘Were you… afraid? They say the Emperor’s Angels are never troubled by such things, that there is nowhere you fear to tread.’

‘That is true and untrue,’ Meros told him. ‘The matter of which changes, dependent on the circumstance.’

‘I am. Afraid, I mean.’

The admission came out of nowhere, and Meros was uncertain as to how he should react. The Apothecary felt the sense of distance between the two of them very distinctly in that moment: he, the improved post-human, engineered to be above such things; Gerwyn an ordinary soul, ill-prepared for the dangers of a lethal universe.

He went on. ‘Last time, when we translated space to Nartaba, I was up here. I wanted to see what the warp looked like, even if it was just a shadow of it.’

‘That’s not for men like you,’ Meros told him. ‘It’ll burn your eyes from your head. It pulls at your reason.’

‘Aren’t those just stories too?’ Gerwyn managed a weak grin.

‘You should go below,’ said the Apothecary. ‘Come–’

Meros never finished his words; without warning, out across the bow of the *Hermia,* a brilliant, shimmering aura folded out of the darkness. It peeled open, petals of spatial reality folding back like

the layers of bloody skin around a wound. The remembrancer shouted wordlessly and stumbled back towards the bulkhead behind them, raising his hands to hide his face from the sudden plume of hellish light. Then the *Hermia*'s warning klaxons began a shrill chorus, the deck conducting a rumble as multiple autonomic gun batteries turned to face the still-forming warp gate.

The Apothecary saw the slit in space-time yawn open and eject an iron spar from its shimmering depths. It was a starship of Imperial design, similar in mass and structure to the *Hermia*. But where the cruiser was adorned with livery and symbols showing its allegiance to the IX Legion Astartes, the new arrival was flying the stoic colours of Terra's grand army. The ship's engines were alive with full thrust, and it came uncomfortably close to the *Hermia*'s crimson hull as it fell back into normal space.

The cruiser's deck tilted sharply and Meros gripped a guide rail to steady himself as the gravity plates in the deck struggled to keep up with the abrupt course change the *Hermia*'s helmsman was making. The massive ship veered off, making distance as best it could.

Out in the black, the warp rift irised shut with a puff of abnormal radiation and sickly, false-colour emissions. Gerwyn was shaking as he dared to look up. 'Is it gone?' he asked, his voice barely audible over the sirens.

'The ship?'

'The warp rift!'

'Aye,' nodded Meros. 'The fool commanding that vessel must be desperate or stupid to exit the warp so close to a translation point…' He frowned. Such tactics were sometimes used by privateers on well-travelled cargo lanes, or by shipmasters attempting to blockade a star system. The Blood Angel jogged to the portside range of the gallery and peered out, watching the new arrival bleed off forward velocity on massive, jagged spars of thruster flame.

Puffing out his breath, the remembrancer came stumbling after him, in time to witness a flicker of silver emerge from the flank of the Imperial Army cruiser.

'Is that a shuttle?' said Gerwyn. 'It is. Coming this way.'

Meros said nothing, scrutinising the shape of the approaching craft. It resolved into the shape of a Thunderhawk, turning sharply as it made for the docking port of the nearest ship – which happened to be the *Hermia*. Already the big cruiser was applying thrust to its main drives once more, angling down and away, gathering speed as if it were eager to get away as fast as possible.

The Thunderhawk came around and dived past the gun gallery, giving Meros and the remembrancer a clear look at the brazen sigil painted on its wings; the silhouette of a snarling Fenrisian wolf-head, set against a steel-grey diamond.

'The… the sons of Russ?' Gerwyn turned to the Blood Angel, brimming with new questions; but the look in Meros's eyes killed them before they could be uttered.

'Return to your quarters and stay there,' the Apothecary told him, breaking into a full sprint once more.

The Sanguinary Guard's face hardened as he strode across the deck of the *Hermia*'s tertiary shuttle bay, his flinty eyes narrowing to slits. A semi-circle of legionaries were already taking up stations around the edge of the vacant landing pad, bolters at the ready, but he ignored them and marched forwards, watching the silver-steel Thunderhawk float in through the glittering membrane of the protective atmo-field. Chilled by the touch of space, the ship's fuselage instantly grew a thin sheen of

frost from the moisture in the air, dissipating anew in faint wisps of vapour.

Azkaellon defied safety protocols and stood directly beneath the prow of the Thunderhawk as it turned in place, hovering on the thrust from flaring exhaust nozzles. He glimpsed a hazy shape moving behind the armourglass of the cockpit canopy, and then the craft was coming down, kicking up fumes across the pad. He glared at the ship as if he were staring down a great animal, watching it settle on its landing skids as the downdraft buffeted him, whipping at his dark, shoulder-length hair.

The keening whine of the engines had barely faded before the drop-ramp in the Thunderhawk's belly fell open with a grunt of hydraulics, and as the Guard Commander had expected, a party of warriors in full armour and battle pelts rode it down to the deck. They looked ready for deployment into any war that might want them, even though this was a place of equals and allies.

But do the Space Wolves count any Legion as their equal? Azkaellon resisted the temptation to fold his arms over the barrel chest of his ornate artificer armour, instead giving full scrutiny to the sons of Russ as they scanned the bay from the end of the ramp. He noted that not one of them had yet stepped off and onto the deck of the Blood Angels starship.

The Wolf at the head of the pack spoke first. 'Who is in charge here?' The warrior bore the rank marks of a captain, and complex tribal runes about his breastplate that hinted at many battles in his past. A black-furred pelt hung from his shoulders and he was armed with a thickset bolter of unfamiliar pattern in a fast-draw holster at his hip. Across the captain's chest was a short scabbard, angled downwards so that the combat blade it held could be quickly unsheathed; the cover was studded with flecks of quartz and the weapon's grip was covered in crimson leather.

The legionary stepped off the ramp and advanced, glancing around as if he were entering a combat zone, and Azkaellon knew full well that the Wolf captain was perfectly aware of who had seniority of command. The significance of the Sanguinary Guard's golden armour was unmistakable, yet the visitor chose not to acknowledge it.

His lips thinned. It was typical of the VI Legion to indulge in such little gestures of insolence, like dogs snarling and barking at first meeting in order to ascertain who was the alpha. For now, he would play along. 'I am Azkaellon, Chosen of Sanguinius. You may address me.'

'Of course,' said the captain, reaching up to remove his helmet. Beneath the ceramite, the warrior had a heavy, ice-scarred face. His scalp was shorn, but he made up for it with a shaggy, unkempt beard braided with silver. 'Well met, Guard Commander. I am Helik Redknife.' He offered no other information about himself, no record of great company or honorific, as if his name alone were enough to mark him.

Azkaellon glanced around, noting that the Blood Angels surrounding him had not relaxed, each of them picking up on his posture and manner. Out beyond the edges of the landing pad, he saw too that some of the *Hermia*'s crew serfs were pausing in their duties to watch the exchange, and on one of the upper gantries, the Sanguinary Guard spotted a lone legionary in duty robes observing him.

He looked away. 'Captain Redknife. You should consider yourself fortunate that you were not burned from the sky. Such an arrival without warning is reckless. The gun crews of this task force remain on high alert, their weapons primed.'

'Fortune has little to do with it,' Redknife replied briskly. 'And I have no time for matters of etiquette.' As he spoke, the remainder of his Space Wolves followed him down onto the landing deck, falling into a rough formation that the untrained eye might have considered careless, almost random.

For the first time, Azkaellon noted the presence of a Rune Priest standing in Redknife's shadow.

The Wolf cleric's armour was dressed with scrimshawed bones, his open-faced helm apparently carved out of a great canine's skull. He was careful to stay at his commander's shoulder, his hand forever on the hilt of a serrated force sword. The Sanguinary Guard unconsciously mirrored the priest's gesture, his gauntlet falling to the pommel of his glaive encarmine. 'I see that is so,' he said. 'Not only do you break the simple rules of fleet protocol, but you also defy the Emperor's edict.' He jutted his chin towards the Rune Priest. 'You know that psykers are no longer permitted within the Legiones Astartes.'

The cleric answered in a tongue that Azkaellon could not understand, but he knew enough to recognise a Fenrisian dialect when he heard it. Redknife gave a brief nod. 'My battle-brother Stiel is not a witch-mind, Blood Angel, and he forgives you for your error. It is a common misconception.'

'Can he not tell me that himself, in Imperial Gothic?'

'No,' said the captain. 'My skald speaks in our ancient way. It is a tradition, you understand?'

'I don't.' Azkaellon's tone grew colder. 'And I say again: the Decree of Nikaea has forbidden the use of psychic powers. Your… *priest*… should be returned to the rank and file, not allowed to treat with the warp.'

Stiel made a hissing noise, but Redknife silenced him with a look. 'His power is pure. It comes from Fenris, as does mine. That is the explanation I will give you, the only explanation.' He gestured at the air. 'Now, we may continue on in this vein or we may cut to the meat of this. Which do you choose, Guard Commander?'

For a moment, Azkaellon entertained the notion of placing the arrogant Wolves in the *Hermia*'s brig, or ejecting them and their Thunderhawk back into void. 'A question, then, Space Wolf. Why have you interrupted our journey? There is a vital summons that this flotilla must answer and your unexpected arrival hinders us.'

'I am well aware of your agenda,' Redknife told him. 'It is why we made such haste to reach the Nartaba system before you departed. The immaterium grows restless and yours was the only Blood Angels contingent in close proximity that we could be certain of reaching.' He settled his helmet on a clip at his belt. 'My unit and I have been given a new posting, an attachment to the command of your primarch Sanguinius.' The captain held out his hand and one of his squad produced a message tube from a drawstring pouch of cured animal skin, passing it to his commander. Redknife twisted the tube to open it and a leaf of photic parchment issued out.

Azkaellon took the proffered document and looked it over. His eyes were drawn to a thermal seal branded into the translucent paper. The design resembled a strange mathematical symbol, with an upward-turned eye at its centre.

'This order comes directly from Lord Malcador, the Sigillite and Regent of Terra. My master Lord Russ endorses it,' explained the Wolf captain. 'And it cannot be countermanded.'

'You brought this all the way from Terra…' Azkaellon said without looking up, absorbing every word on the page.

'No. We were given this tasking as we were the closest to your location. We will come with you to the *Red Tear* and the Angel's court. As you can see from the Sigillite's wording, time is deemed to be of the essence.'

However, the text Redknife referred to was clouded with vagaries and it said little that could be firmly grasped beyond the core of the order. That this document and these commands were authentic was beyond all doubt – the photic parchment would have been tele-kinetically transcribed by a bound

astropathic savant and all relevant codes and cipher-phrases were in place – but there was almost nothing to explain precisely *why* Malcador had suddenly chosen to send a party of Space Wolves to accompany the Great Angel. At last, Azkaellon looked up and met Redknife's cool gaze. 'And what is your mission, captain?'

'It is what it has always been, to serve the Emperor of Mankind and defend the Imperium from all that threatens it.'

Azkaellon's noble mien creased into a scowl. 'A more specific description would be appreciated.'

'I have no doubt.'

His tolerance fading with each passing moment, the Sanguinary Guard came closer and lowered his voice so that it would not carry. 'Am I expected to accept that such a thing is beyond my *need to know*? I am the commander of the Angel's chosen. There is no rank above mine in this Legion, save for the primarch himself.'

Redknife nodded, showing no reaction to the Blood Angel's growing annoyance. 'This is known to me. All I can tell you is that we are here…' The Space Wolf paused, searching for the right words. 'We are here to keep watch.'

'You are observers?' The idea of it seemed unrealistic; the sons of Russ had never been known to stand sentinel when there was a fight to be had. The very idea of it went against everything Azkaellon knew about their character.

'We will agree to call it that,' Redknife replied. 'I have no wish to further lengthen the delay of the flotilla's departure. If you will provide us with temporary quarters, my squad and I will… stay out of your way.'

Azkaellon studied the captain's stoic expression for any sign of subterfuge, but found nothing he could interpret; and as much as he wanted to interrogate the Space Wolf further, out at the rendezvous the Angel's grand fleet would be waiting for the *Hermia* and the rest of the *Ignis* task force to join them. Further delay would not be tolerated.

'See to Captain Redknife's needs,' said the Sanguinary Guard at length, summoning a Legion serf with a terse gesture. He turned his back on the Space Wolves and walked away. 'Secure the ship!' he snapped. 'Contact the *Ignis* and pass on the order to enter the immaterium.'

He looked up and found the Blood Angels legionary still watching from the gantry above. *Meros. The one who was injured.* The warrior's expression was filled with questions, and Azkaellon grimaced, sharing his uncertainty.

'He's here! He's *here*!' Marshal Zauber's aide crashed in through the door of his office in a state that was somewhere between panic and elation. Her name was Rozin, and he'd picked her for the job because she was both competent and pleasant to look at. In a marshal's career, the latter was a rarity, for the colony's complex political matrix was largely made up of aged types or scarred war veterans. They were people who seemed to make an art of being unattractive despite all the finery they draped over themselves, despite all the high office and ranks that they bestowed upon one another.

Most of them were dead now. He shook off that thought and scrambled up from behind his desk, ignoring the accumulated piles of data-slates he dislodged in passing. He made for the door and the wide staircase that curved down the length of the council hall to the ground floor.

The dense, ruddy light that made everything look like old blood seeped over the walls and the carpet, turning the familiar corridors and steps into something dreamlike and unreal.

No. Not dreamlike, that was the wrong word. *Nightmarish*.

It was all that way, everything. The light, the walls and the floor, all of it wrong. Rozin was at his heels as he ran, and he realised that she was wrong too. Her voice was high and brittle in a way it hadn't been before. As if she was constantly on the edge of hysteria.

Did Zauber's voice sound like that to her? He wanted to ask, but also he was afraid to. In case she told him, *yes, you do sound as if you're losing your mind.* He wanted to ask her if she were hearing the same noises at the edge of her awareness, like whispers or the rustle of pages being turned. Did Rozin see the odd blinks out of the corner of her eye too? The ghosts of shapes in mirrors or anything reflective?

Did she find it hard not to think about stabbing people to death? Did she have nightmares all the time? Did Rozin want to scream and scream and scream until her throat filled with blood, and–

He shook it off, with a literal gesture and a small 'no' sound that perhaps the girl noticed but didn't comment on. They crossed the atrium and Zauber looked up at the skylights. Shafts of twisted luminosity were here, rods of haze reaching down though the holes in the powdery drifts that covered the crystalflex panes. The ash kept falling, and after days of it, the strange phenomenon showed no signs of abating.

It was everywhere, like hot snow, embers of it smouldering and never going out, collecting in heaps or wandering the streets propelled by sudden, searing gusts of wind. If there had been a volcano nearby, that would have made sense. If there had been a vent in the earth spitting fumes into the sky, that would have been something Zauber could grasp. But nowhere on the colony was there anything like that. The endless rain of cinders spilling out of the low, menacing clouds did nothing to obey the strictures of meteorology.

Other planets in the cluster were talking about the same things – or they were in between declarations of alarm and demands that the capital *do something*. At first, Zauber and everyone else on the council had dismissed the early events as pranks or reporting errors, finally upgrading them in grudging manner to the suggestion of some kind of organised demonstration by activists. Foolish, though, he thought. It's nature turning against us, not men.

Alderman Yee, in the hours before he had placed a laspistol between his thin, papery lips and burned out his skull with it, had suggested a different source. Yee was of rogue trader stock, once a well-travelled shipmaster before love and marriage had enticed him to set to surface and live a colonist's life, and it was to him that they had turned when the first person suggested the question of xenos involvement. The old spacer had said something about the warp, but Zauber had not understood the things he spoke of. Born and raised within the bounds of the colony worlds, the marshal had never crossed into the immaterium, never even set foot aboard an interstellar vessel. He tried now to remember exactly what Yee had said, but Zauber's thoughts were snagged on the last memory he had of the alderman: the sordid image of him curled around the long shape of the duelling gun, suckling on the barrel of it like a newborn at a mother's teat.

The list of what the science commissioners had termed 'anomalous events' grew by the day. A five hundred per cent rise in birth defect mutations in the farm communities that was now spreading from livestock to human babies in the hive city medical centres. Entire settlements going silent, some fortifying themselves and cutting off all outside contact, others just... becoming empty. Mysterious broadcasts on the watch-wire that induced vomiting and irrational fear in all those who heard them. A spike in the rates of suicide and murder. Dead birds. A rash of inexplicable graffiti – peculiar

geometric shapes – appearing on the sides of hab-towers, on roadways, even cut into hills.

No single world was immune to it. The strangeness was spreading like a wave, building in magnitude, and Marshal Zauber had no idea how to deal with it. The responsibility had fallen to him only through line of succession. The other members of the council had either taken their own lives or died in the inexplicable arson attack that burned down the parliament building; only a quirk of fate had ensured that Zauber was elsewhere when it happened, waylaid by a ground-traffic accident on the mainway. At first he thought this had been good luck, but now he was wondering if it was the exact opposite. The burden of duty had come to rest upon him and he was floundering beneath it.

The colonists called for help, first from their neighbours and then from the Imperial Administratum, the Army, the Legiones Astartes, from any agency that was listening. But none of the courier ships dispatched towards the segmentum core had reported in, and all astropathic messages went unanswered. There had been a moment when they believed a reply was coming in, but the signal had turned out to be a deformed echo of the first distress call, somehow reflected back at them.

No more signals were sent after that. No more sendings were possible. The astropaths began to die, one at a time, from a wasting malaise that non-psykers were immune to. The last Zauber had heard, the medicae on one of the orbital platforms had the few remaining telepaths in deep isolation. He imagined they had followed their kindred into slow decay.

The doors opened automatically as Zauber came up to them, Rozin's shoes clacking over the tiled floor behind him. Two garrison troopers, men with the hollow-eyed look of soldiers who had not rested in days, fell in either side of them and brought up their lasrifles, wary of the swirling haze outside and what it might conceal.

The hot air tasted like sulphur, and it immediately stole away all moisture in Zauber's throat and nostrils. Across the great courtyard, the ornamental fountain was caked in dust and the pool beneath it had become a slurry of grey mud. The gardens bordering the square were brown and rotting, grasses and flowers smothered by the ash, choked of sunlight. On a normal day, the marshal would have been able to look out of the courtyard's great arch and down along the Planetfall Road, the colony's first highway; but the hab-blocks that lined the wide boulevard were lost to him, with only the suggestions of their carved majesty visible through the ceaseless ash-storm.

He heard the throaty noise of heavy military engines. Rozin was pointing. 'There!' She jabbed a finger at the road, and Zauber saw the flicker of headlights growing brighter as vehicles approached. They were coming from the direction of the spaceport, but they were very definitely not the light half-track rovers of the planetary garrison force stationed out there. Absently, Zauber remembered that the men he had sent to guard the port had not reported in for more than a day.

The obscured vehicles resolved into shadows, then defined as hard-sided shapes that rolled swiftly towards them, shoving abandoned groundcars out of their way with broad metal bumpers. Dense caterpillar tracks crunched over the rockcrete as the convoy of armoured machines slowed and folded into a V-formation as they halted. They were armoured personnel carriers of a design that Zauber had not seen before, great bricks of metal adorned with weapon sponsons, plated turrets and whip antennae that snapped in the wind.

Hatches clanked open and soldiers in purple-black uniforms and atmosphere gear disembarked, casting around with the porcine snouts of their breather masks. Zauber made an attempt to smooth back his hair and straighten his brocade jacket, but did little more than smear the ash flakes that had settled upon him.

From the back of the largest transport came the arrival they had been waiting for. He was tall and thin, and Zauber was put off by the first thought that came to mind as the man approached: he was reminded of something sinuous and reptilian.

'I am Marshal Zauber,' he announced, pushing the image aside. 'This is my aide, Rozin.' It was impossible to pause. 'Sir, you have no idea how pleased we are to see you.'

The man gave a languid nod, the broad preacher hat on his head bobbing. 'My name is Bruja. Emissary of the Imperium.' His eyes were hidden behind a pair of mirrored glare-shields that seemed redundant in the flat, sunless daylight. 'Your call has been heeded.' He wore robes that went from his neck to the ground, hanging off him in a flowing cone of material. The robes were lined with silver and gold threads in a design that suggested either a bending river or a snake.

'You have ships?' Rozin blurted out the question, her excitement peaking.

'A small vessel brought me here.' Bruja's voice had a rough-smooth quality to it, like that of a habitual tabac smoker. 'Other ships are on the way. A fleet.'

From inside the folds of the robe came a pale, long-fingered hand. Bruja held up a circular medallion made of bright, mirrored silver, and when he spoke again it was with a ritual formality. 'You have called for help and I have come as representative of those who heard you.'

The medallion turned in Bruja's hand and Zauber found he couldn't look away from it. He saw the distinct designs on the surfaces of the disc: on one side, the symbol of a wolf and a crescent moon, the other showing a baleful eye. *The Eye of Horus*.

'The Warmaster?' The question slipped from him.

Bruja's head bobbed. 'I carry the seal of Horus Lupercal and by extension the authority of the Warmaster himself. He has heard the cries of distress from this world and her neighbours, and dispatched me to take charge in the interim. I will guide you through this emergency.'

Zauber felt a tremendous flood of relief wash over him. He was a caretaker politician, he always had been. A gentleman of good conduct and slight ambition, but not a leader of men, not a soul with the strength to weather the kind of disaster that was overwhelming his colony. More than anything, he wanted someone to step in and take the weight of that from him – and Bruja was that person. He pushed away the nagging sense of unease the emissary instilled in him and concentrated on that.

At his side, Rozin was nodding, wiping tears from her eyes. She doubtless felt the same way. 'Such terrible, inexplicable things have been occurring,' said the woman, as they made their way back towards the council hall. 'Order has broken down, Lord Bruja.'

The emissary's manner was calm and metered, as if they were taking a walk on a pleasant summer's day. 'Balance will be restored,' he assured them. 'I swear it to you.'

'Is it... Is it an alien invasion?' Zauber leaned close, becoming conspiratorial. 'These anomalies, they seem like attempts to use psychological warfare against us.'

Bruja studied him for a long moment, then nodded once. 'Marshal, your insight is great. You are correct. But we must not speak widely of this truth. There would be mass panic.'

'Yes. Yes, indeed.' There was panic already, of course, but in an isolated fashion, in pockets that could be put down and dealt with. The emissary's words made sense, didn't they? Zauber was grasping at them, desperate to find agreement with the new arrival.

Some of Bruja's troops were working at the rear of a broad transporter vehicle, and with a sudden clatter, shifting hull plates folded up like gull's wings to reveal the interior. Rozin caught sight of the activity and slowed, squinting into the dust to watch.

The emissary cleared his throat with a rasp. 'I will need to claim this facility for my operations, Marshal, you understand? My men will need a billet and I require a place where I can begin my work.'

'It will be done.' Zauber nodded. 'Our resources are yours to command.'

Rozin was pointing again. 'What is that?'

Zauber turned to look. The troopers were guiding a capsule out of the transport. It was the size of a large groundcar, and the flanks of the rectangular object were made of what looked like dense crystal. The marshal thought he saw lines of curious glyphs etched in the panels, and small puffs of red smoke spat from the base of the container to dissipate into the ash-filled air. Suddenly, there was the sting of ozone in his nostrils, and something else along with it. The faint odour of old meat.

'The Warmaster has several… uncommon technologies at his fingertips. That is one of them. The seed of it, at any rate.' Bruja kept walking, forcing them to turn away and keep up.

'I don't follow you,' said Zauber. 'Is it a weapon?'

'A technology,' Bruja repeated. 'You need not concern yourself about its function.' The emissary reached the doors of the council hall and looked up for the first time, into the clouded sky.

Zauber wasn't certain, but he thought he saw the man smile slightly.

Rozin gave a fragile, nervous laugh. 'Lord Bruja, forgive me, but you seem so composed in the face of our crisis. You have heard our mayday messages, you know the scope of the phenomena we have been experiencing…' She swallowed a breath and waved at the heavens. 'Does this not unsettle you?'

Bruja stopped on the threshold of the hall and gave her his attention. 'No. On the world where I was born, such a sky would not seem out of place.'

'Terra?' Zauber wondered aloud.

The emissary shook his head. 'A distant colony planet, but I doubt you would have heard its name. Few in this sector know of Davin.'

It meant nothing to Zauber, that was true. 'Still,' he began, 'that you have come so far to aid us speaks greatly to your–'

The marshal's reply was broken by the sullen slap of a thick, fluid droplet striking the ground near his feet. By reflex, he looked up as more fell, dappling his black jacket. A bead exploded against his face and he flinched, reaching up to wipe off the liquid.

Zauber's hand came away crimson, and he smelled wet copper. The ash fall had transformed. Now, instead of the flakes of grey ember, a torrent of dark drops came from the sullen clouds, hissing as they kissed the stonework all about them.

Rozin released a piercing shriek and fled into the building, rivulets of red streaking her face and clothing. Zauber staggered after her, feeling his gorge rise. *Blood*. The rain had become blood, as warm as if it were freshly shed. 'Wh-what is happening?' he piped.

Bruja walked slowly, unperturbed by the horrific rains. 'Don't fear it,' he said. 'You will be saved. All these worlds will be saved.'

'Saved?' Zauber forced out the word. He was afraid now, more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

The emissary nodded, a sliver of black tongue appearing at his lips. 'Signus Prime will be reborn. And you will all be a part of it.'

FOUR

Well Met
Light-Bringers
Angel of Pain

The hull of the Storm Eagle resonated with the pulse of its engines, and reflected shards of alien starlight flickered across the viewports as the craft threaded its way through the Blood Angels warfleet. Standing free in the troop compartment, Brother Meros walked cautiously along the length of the gunship's loading racks, listening carefully to the motivators in his power armour, to the low whine of the artificial musculature beneath the ceramite sheath. He was pleased to be clad in his battle plate once more; the repair work of the Legion's Techmarines had fully restored his armour to combat readiness, and there was no trace of the point-blank impact of the eldar soulseeker round that had almost cost him his life. For the first time in weeks, Meros felt correct, his spirits lifted.

The view through the portal did much to enhance his mood. Out in the blackness, as far as his augmented vision could see, there were starships. The majestic sight of them stirred emotion deep in his twin hearts.

An armada of crimson steel and black iron hung in the void, floating there like the vast sculptures of a martial artisan. Huge battle-barges, bespoke creations built in the massive orbital manufactories of Foss, drifted past with stately menace. The size of cities, they bristled with galleries of weapons powerful enough to scour the surface of a planet, and their launch bays were packed with squadrons of attack fighters, bombers and landers. Towers covered their dorsal and ventral hulls, thousands of lights glittering on their flanks, and even at this distance Meros could make out the artistic flourishes of their grand designs – the metal statuary and ornamental forgings that decorated their wide hammerhead bows.

Smaller capital ships moved in the shadow of the bigger craft, but their scale against the barges was deceptive. Many of the other vessels were three or four times the length of the *Hermia* – grand cruisers and battleships that were more than enough to project the fearsome power of the Imperium. Some were built around the spines of megaweapons, engines and crew compartments clustered about nucleonic lasers, particle bombardment arrays and lance cannon clusters. These in turn were flanked by their own companion ships, riding with escorts, gunboats or destroyers in close formation.

The Storm Eagle banked as it passed over a group of Nova-class frigates in a staggered line-abreast formation, and Meros looked down on the red prows of the warships, the Legion's sigil emblazoned proudly on their flanks. There were hundreds of ships out here, brought together under the glow of a lonely pulsar, in a region largely devoid of colonial systems – or indeed anything at all. The rendezvous was on the edge of one of the galaxy's spiral arms, and if one faced in the right direction, the near-lightless infinity of intergalactic space filled the sky. Some might have felt humbled by that, but not Meros. All around him, he saw the living exemplars of the power of the Blood Angels Legion,

and by that mark the power of humankind to hold back the night.

These ships and the warriors aboard them were the scions of Baal and Terra, forever challenging the stars. To be part of that great endeavour was to be one among millions; and yet Meros never felt he was diminished because of it. Rather, the grand mission, this Great Crusade, elevated them all.

With the arrival of the *Ignis* and her task force, the gathering of the Blood Angels host was now complete, and the grand fleet was in preparation to make space for their ultimate destination. The anticipation of the battle they were next to fight gathered in Meros as if it were a tangible energy, like a static charge across his skin. He knew that his brothers felt the same way.

The Storm Eagle's blunt nose was turning, and suddenly there was a wall of adamantium ahead of them. The heart of the fleet lay ahead: the *Red Tear*, flagship and chariot of the Angel himself.

Meros took a breath. It was an effort to turn away from the spectacle of the mighty starship, but he did so. His eyes fell on a group of legionaries at the far end of the cargo compartment, their grey armour blending into the metallic hues of the decking.

None of the Space Wolves reacted to his scrutiny, even though they must have noticed it. The sons of Russ spoke quietly amongst themselves, their captain busying himself with the sharpening of the combat knife he wore in a chest-scabbard. The weapon whispered along a whetstone, catching the light as it moved.

Meros was unsure what to expect from the Fenrisians; he had never fought alongside them in battle, and what the Blood Angel knew of the Space Wolves' reputation came from a mix of tales that painted them as barbarians and brutal lords of war. He was intrigued, though; the Apothecary believed that the measure of a man was best learned directly, not through the experiences of others. He wondered if he would have an opportunity to speak to the Wolf-kindred.

'They say Russ's Legion kill and eat their wounded.' Meros's squadmate Sarga appeared at his side, his narrow face and tight cowl of blond hair drained of colour by the harsh glow of the cargo bay illuminators. 'I could believe it.'

Meros eyed him. 'What do you think *they* say about *us*?' He showed his teeth, the hard light flashing off his canines. 'That we drink the blood of our enemies? Which is true?'

Sarga's familiar crooked smile pulled at his lips. 'Spend some time with Captain Amit's company and you'll have that answer, eh?'

The Apothecary's attention was drawn to the one called Stiel, the Rune Priest. His head was bowed and he was hard at work with a small, thin tool, busy with what appeared to be a length of jawbone. Stiel was carving tiny lines in the bleached surface of the bone, drawing runes and symbols. Clasped in the thick fingers of his battle gauntlet, the etching rod was a tiny thing, yet he moved it back and forth with great dexterity. Other, similarly carved fetishes and trinkets hung from leather cords draped around the Space Wolf's neck, and Meros found himself wondering after the meanings of them. The Blood Angel's armour had its own decorative items – campaign studs, the red device of the Prime Helix – but nothing so apparently fragile or impermanent as the bone.

'Perhaps I should ask the Wolf,' said Meros. 'We are all brothers under the Emperor, after all. Legion badge makes no difference.'

Sarga snorted softly, affecting the lightly mocking tone that seemed to be his default manner. 'Azkaellon would not agree with that. You were there. You saw how Redknife refused to bend the knee to him. I think it true to say that the Guard Commander would have left the Wolves down on the bilge decks if he could have.' He turned away. 'Let them be, Meros. If they won't be drawn on their

reasons for joining us, so be it. They can watch us win this coming fight and then take that story back to the Fang. Perhaps we'll teach the barbarians something.'

Meros frowned, thinking of Stiel's careful carving. 'They're not barbarians. One could use that word for the junkhunters and desert tribes on Baal, and be just as mistaken. If Azkaellon thinks that, he should reconsider.'

'Tell him yourself, then.' Sarga jerked a thumb at the bow. 'He's in the cockpit right now. I'm sure he'd appreciate your input.'

'I'll keep my own counsel,' Meros replied, following him back down the length of the craft. 'If the illustrious commander wants to hear from one as far down the ranks as me, I'm sure he knows where to look.'

'No doubt,' Sarga said wryly.

Red lights flashed into life over their heads and a hooting klaxon sounded twice.

From the acceleration frames, Sergeant Cassiel gave a shout that carried the length of the troop bay. 'We're landing! Take your places, make ready and be on your watch! This is the primarch's flagship, and we will show it respect!'

The Storm Eagle's nose dipped and the smooth passage through vacuum became the shudder of atmospheric flight as the ship crossed through the *Red Tear*'s atmospheric envelope.

Meros took a last look out of the viewport, and saw red iron flash past him, swallowed moments later by the brilliant glare of service lamps.

The crimson Storm Eagle was just one among many, flights of them hanging from maintenance racks overhead or nestled in arming pits where Legion serfs were loading rocket pods and missiles onto under-wing hardpoints. Its entrance would have gone unnoticed but for the high rank of one of its passengers and the delay in its arrival. Brother Kano was observing from the main gantry as Azkaellon marched down the boarding ramp to be met by Sergeant Zuriel, and the two Sanguinary Guard shared a terse greeting. Their gold armour stood out starkly against the steel of the landing platform. Azkaellon did not wait for the rest of the party on board to disembark, setting off swiftly with Zuriel, leaving the contingent of warriors from the Ninth Company to find their own way.

Kano watched Azkaellon go, sensing the dark mood that trailed him like a shadow; but then he dismissed the thought as a smile crossed his lips. A familiar face appeared among the Blood Angels emerging from beneath the Storm Eagle's fuselage, and he strode down to meet him. 'Meros!'

The Apothecary looked up and returned the same grin. 'Kano! Well met, brother.' They shook hands warmly, and Meros nodded. 'I might have known I would see you here, in the heart of it all.'

'The First Company,' he replied. 'We are ever the tip of the lance.'

One of Meros's squadmates eyed him. 'Just tell your honoured captain to remember to save us some foes to smite, eh?'

'This is Sarga,' said Meros. 'He saved my life on Nartaba Octus, and that's made him hungry to be a hero again.'

Kano raised an eyebrow. 'I'm sure Raldoron will have work enough for Captain Furio and the rest of you.'

Meros laughed. 'You don't change, brother.'

His friend's off-hand comment had an unexpected bite that the former Librarian didn't expect, but he shrugged it off. 'I've been known to. But that's not the issue… Mark me, but I expected to see

nothing but your gene-seed return from Nartaba. The eldar…' He paused as he saw Meros's expression darken. 'We were told it was hard fought back there.'

The squad sergeant came within earshot, nodding grimly. 'Aye, that's the fact.' He gave him a look. 'You're Kano, then? I am Cassiel. I understand Meros would have been dead five years back if not for you?'

'A minor incident on Brecht IX. I was just in the right place at the right time, sergeant,' Kano said, dismissing the comment. 'And I owe Meros as much as he owes me.'

Sarga smirked. 'For a medicae, our errant battle-brother has a marked tendency to put himself in harm's way, don't you think?'

'I have no wish for death,' Meros retorted. 'Glory, though…' He grinned. 'In the Angel's name, I'll take all of that.'

The good humour of the meeting waned a little as Kano considered his friend's words. 'There will be opportunity for both in equal measure, brothers, if the rumours through the fleet are to be believed.'

'Never been one for shipboard gossip,' Cassiel said with a grimace.

Sarga cocked his head. 'I could stand to hear it. Or has it escaped everyone's notice that we are amongst a gathering of heroes so large that it blots out suns? How many of us are there here in this place? The entire Legion?'

'There will be a small caretaker force back on the home world,' said Meros. 'But aye, Sarga is correct. I've never seen so many of our starships in one location before.'

'It is happening,' Kano agreed, 'by the direct order of the Warmaster. He sent a cohort of Word Bearers to carry the command and accompany us.'

Cassiel's lip curled. 'More outsiders?'

'More?' repeated Kano.

Meros inclined his head towards the Storm Eagle, where a second group of legionaries were disembarking. Kano raised an eyebrow at the figures in grey, watching the Space Wolves as they were formally greeted by a black-armoured Warden. For an instant his glance caught the blank gaze of a warrior in a skull-helm at the back of the group. An old, recognisable sensation began to build behind his eyes, but he cut it dead before it could fully form, breaking away and bringing his attention back to Meros and the others. 'Why are they here?'

'Your guess is as good as ours,' said Sarga. 'Came out of nowhere, they did. With orders from the Sigillite to join the grand fleet.'

Kano frowned. 'The workings of the minds of the Council of Terra are not revealed in their deeds. I can't help but wonder what decisions are made in the halls of the Imperial Palace that we are not privy to.'

'We are Legion,' said Cassiel. 'Ours is to obey and trust in men elevated above us.'

'*We* are, yes.' Sarga glanced at the sergeant. 'I'll follow my primarch into the maw of a black hole if he wishes it. But Kano's right – the Regent and his ilk? They are not of the Legion. Not like us, or *them*.' He nodded at the Space Wolves, as they moved away towards one of the elevator platforms. 'Or even the Word Bearers. Can politicians and legislators understand what it is we have done out here? That's a long, long view from the halls of Terra.'

'Their words are good enough for the Angel.' Cassiel gave him a cold stare. 'They are good enough for you, legionary.'

‘The question that occupies my thoughts remains closer at hand,’ said Meros. He glanced towards Kano. ‘How many of our battle-brothers are at this rendezvous? A hundred thousand?’

‘More,’ he replied, without hesitation. ‘Every one of the companies is represented here, aboard the barges and the command carriers.’

‘A considerable assembly, and one that I would warrant has seldom been repeated in the history of our Legion.’ The Apothecary nodded to himself. ‘Brothers, if we are gathered in such numbers, the question must be asked: what kind of foe are we to be ranged against?’

‘Aye,’ agreed Sarga. ‘We could mount an entire crusade of our own with this army! Meros is right. What’s out there of such threat it needs a hammer this large to break it?’

‘That answer will become clear soon enough,’ said a stern voice. As one, the Blood Angels turned to see the black-armoured Warden approaching them, the bleak visage of his helmet sweeping across their faces. ‘You concern yourself with things beyond your remit.’

Kano frowned. ‘You cannot expect a warrior to meet war and not wish to know why, Annellus.’ From the back, he hadn’t recognised the acerbic Warden’s armour. Now he wondered how much of the conversation Annellus had heard. ‘We are not automata.’

‘You are weapons,’ the Warden retorted. ‘We all are. Blades in the hand of the Angel, sworn to his commands.’

‘I never said otherwise,’ Meros challenged the Warden’s caustic tone. ‘And if I am to fight and die for Sanguinius, I will do so. But all I ask is to know what I face.’

Kano watched as Annellus came up to study Meros, the ruby-tinted lenses of his helmet reflecting his battle-brother’s dark eyes. ‘Are you afraid of what you do not know?’ he demanded.

Sarga let out a low snort. Meros glared back at the Warden. ‘Don’t doubt my resolve.’

‘I am a Warden of the Legion,’ Annellus told him. ‘Matters of *resolve* are my concern.’ Before anyone else could answer, the warrior turned away from Meros, his gaze dwelling on Kano for a moment before moving on. ‘If we question where we need not, we undermine, and in that the seeds of defeat are sown even before the first shot rings out.’ His hand fell to the crozius chained at his hip. ‘Trust your commanders. Know that their orders are true. All else is of secondary concern...’ He trailed off, cocking his head. Kano knew the gesture; he was listening to a vox-signal on a closed channel.

‘If it’s all the same to you, Warden,’ said Sarga, ‘I’ll wait to hear it from the Angel’s lips.’

Annellus looked up. ‘You won’t need to wait, brother.’ He pointed upwards. ‘See.’

All across the Blood Angels battlefleet, golden vox-horns mounted in every wall sounded in a triumphant chorus. The first few bars of the *Anthem Sanguinatus* played down corridors and across decks; every being aboard the ships from Legion serf to company commander knew what those tones signified. The primarch was about to address them.

For a moment, all activity came to a halt. Only mindless servitors and mechanical cogitator units went on about their tasks, oblivious to the great import of the lines of machine-call data reaching out invisibly from the *Red Tear*, lines of data bidding the other vessels in the fleet to pay heed. Pict-screens on billet deck bulkheads and in the open refectories became active. Intercoms went online automatically. Legionaries sealed in their armour found their vox-channels redirected and commandeered, and in spaces where hololithic projector heads were mounted, ghostly shimmers of light faded into being.

One of the *Red Tear*'s many hololithic modules was fitted into the roof of the landing bay where Meros and the others now stood, hundreds of metres up above them. With a gleam of captured photons, the ghost of a great figure appeared, dwarfing the warriors who raised their faces to look up.

Resplendent in glittering armour, shrouded in white wings that vanished as they passed beyond the sphere of the image projector's radius, the Primarch Sanguinius appeared to his Legion with his expression set in a steady, watchful aspect. '*My sons,*' he began, his voice echoing down kilometres of now silent corridors, '*well met. My heart swells with pride to see such splendour in your numbers. The Great Crusade has never seen the like.*'

Proud and resolute, even in this virtual form he radiated a confidence so vital that any shadows of doubt among his sons were, for the moment, banished beneath his light. The detail of the primarch's intricately-worked power armour was rendered perfectly, the sculpted edges of the golden plate visible along with the fine etching across the brassarts, shoulder guards and breastplate. On his chest was a heavy ornamental roundel carved from huge Megladari rubies. The central jewel was cut into the shape of a heart and set on a mount of gold flames, and it signified the burning spirit of the Blood Angels as expressed through their primarch. Atop it were four more ruby discs, each dedicated to one of the worlds where the Legion had drawn its numbers – Terra, in the first instance, then Baal and her two moons. Across one shoulder he wore a ceremonial war cloak, the black-dappled pelt of a carnodon; similar in form to the extinct snow leopards of old Earth but much, much larger, the ice stalker had been Sanguinius's first kill during the pacification of Teghar Pentarus, his initial battle after reuniting with his father.

'*We have a mission,*' he told them. '*One that only our Legion can follow to its completion. My brother, the Warmaster, has entrusted us with a duty vital to the future of the Imperium.*'

He relayed the orders that Horus had given him, grimly revealing the return of the old xenos adversary, the facts of the nephilim's invasion and likely conversion of a densely-populated Imperial dominion. '*In the Signus Cluster, the light of illumination has dwindled to the smallest of embers. Those among those worlds that still hold true to Imperial Truth and their federation with Terra most likely think themselves abandoned or without hope. This cannot stand, my sons.*' His noble aspect became stern and uncompromising. '*Once before we faced the nephilim and fought them unto death. We believed that they were cast down and destroyed, but like a canker, they survived and have grown to plague humanity again. This is not a universe of mythology and false truth!*' The primarch's hand rose and closed into a fist. '*We do not cower in the darkness in fear of ghostly powers and metaphysical phantoms! We do not give worship to false gods! There is only reason and enlightenment, and we are the light-bringers.*'

Throughout the fleet, legionaries raised their mailed fists and slammed them against their breastplates in salute, giving voice to their assent with a roar. Aboard the *Red Tear*, Meros and the others joined in; the clamour was so loud it carried up through the halls of the battle-barge.

Sanguinius heard them, the sound of so many upraised voices resonating across the decks, and he gave a smile of acknowledgment. All around him on the flagship's command deck, the human crew serfs stood by their stations at steady attention, while Commander Azkaellon and his Sanguinary Guards bowed their heads. At the master's throne, Admiral DuCade mirrored the stance of her men, as rigid as if she were carved out of marble.

The primarch appraised them with a look, gauging them for the battle to come. Just as he expected,

he did not find them wanting. The hololithic plate holding him in its glow rendered every tiny movement of his wings, his face, his armoured form. Sanguinius looked forwards and spoke as if he were talking to each warrior of his Legion as an individual.

'My sons. This will be a hard-fought campaign, have no question in your hearts. The nature of this foul alien enemy is well known to us, and we will not claim victory with ease. The nephilim are cornered and they will fight to the bitter end to resist extinction. Some of us may never see the sands of Baal again, but we will all fight knowing that this mission cannot fail. Horus has called upon our Legion to carry out this battle and we will answer him with victory! For the future of mankind, the nephilim must be ended… and as we defeated them once before, we shall defeat them again. These creatures cannot be allowed to live on. Their horrors must be put to the sword, their slaves liberated.' He trailed off and drew his wings close to him. 'We *will* do these things. We are the Blood Angels, and we fear not. We are proud sons of the Imperium and the protectors of mankind. We are the Angels of Death and the Emperor's Wrath!'

The shouts came again, and this time it was almost as if the *Red Tear* were shaking with the force of so many warriors joined in martial zeal.

The primarch nodded and turned away from the hololith, the relay fading out. Raldoron was there at his side, the First Captain's face set in a severe mask.

Sanguinius stepped closer to his trusted officer. 'You do not join your voice to the affirmation, captain? Should I ask why?'

When Raldoron spoke, it was in a low tone that was shared only between the warrior and his warlord. 'I affirm,' he said. 'But these orders – and the deeper truth beneath them – trouble me.'

The Angel's smile faded away. He had revealed some of the message sent by Horus to his closest confidants, to those who knew the sorrowful matter of the lost. Now, for a moment, he wondered if he had been wrong to do so. 'Speak your mind, Ral,' he told him.

'I would not presume to go against your orders, my lord,' said the officer. 'But this mission, and the… the resolution that may await us in the Signus Cluster. Must we still conceal this from your sons?' Raldoron looked away. 'Master, you may think less of me, but I swear to you the burden of this knowledge weighs heavy upon me. It always has.'

'I know.' Sanguinius nodded once. 'So too it does for all who share it, and none more than I. But this is not the time, my friend.'

'Perhaps,' Raldoron demurred. 'But that time will come, my lord. And it will not be at a moment of your choosing, unless you make it so.'

He nodded again. 'This too is clear to me. You have my gratitude, Ral, that you are here to remind me. Trust me when I tell you, we will defeat our adversaries.' He smiled again. '*All* of them, without and within.'

The primarch turned back to the central operations dais to meet Admiral DuCade's waiting gaze. 'What is your command, my lord?' she asked. 'All ships report ready to translate to the immaterium. We await your word.'

'The word is given,' Sanguinius told her. 'Light the drives and take us in.' He pointed out through the armourglass windows that stretched across the length of the flying bridge as Raldoron stepped up to his side. 'All speed to Signus.'

The gates of reality broke open and the fleet surged into the immaterium. Hundreds of Navigators,

chaining their thoughts together into a web of subsumed egos, guided the Blood Angels starships out of the darkness of the void and into a very different kind of abyss. The screaming madness of non-space embraced them. Some among the Navigators, the most experienced of their number, sensed a shift in the transit. Something subtle, something so vague it barely registered.

Warp travel was never a thing of ease, and given the recent rise of storms and psychic turbulence in the immaterium, the forecast for the deployment was guarded. It was not unknown for ships to be torn apart simply by the act of translation; punching a hole in space-time was not just a matter of opening a doorway, but an event of great violence and power. In dimensional transition these tragedies happened, and it was an accepted part of the voyage, a necessary risk. The greater the skill of the Navigator, the less likely it would be, but in a fleet as large as this one, in a mass translation event, there was a good chance that some craft would be damaged or even destroyed.

There were *none*. Not one vessel of the Blood Angels fleet suffered even the smallest iota of warp-effect harm. It was as if the immaterium had welcomed them with the ease of a blade slipped into water.

Aboard the *Dark Page*, the Acolyte Kreed felt the brief whisper of communion as the Word Bearers ship translated with the Blood Angels fleet, and he chuckled. The touch of the immaterium upon his soul was like nectar, and the loss of it immediately brought a ripple of sorrow as it passed on, fading.

One day he would feel that touch and it would stay with him, Kreed told himself. One day, he would be blessed beyond all measure.

The Acolyte turned away from the churning crimson sky beyond the windows of the wide sacellum chamber, and moved back into the centre of the chapel-like room, glancing at Captain Harox. While Kreed had removed his armour and returned to robes of office, Harox, resplendent in his ascended livery, the etchings of text upon his battle plate corrupted and broken, forming new words and symbols that spelt out a blasphemous litany. And if the light shone upon Harox just so, one could see what appeared to be a complex net of octal stars buried in the sheen of the plate.

The Acolyte's smile deepened and he pulled back the hood of his robes. As he approached the figure lying in a heap across the middle of the chamber floor, Kreed allowed himself to think about his future, and the promises he had been given.

Kreed licked his lips and dared to wonder what it would be like to live with the touch of the warp within his flesh every second of every day. The thought of it aroused sensations in him that he could not quantify, but did not wish to cease.

The woman Sahzë looked up at the Acolyte from beneath the crook of her arm and whimpered. She was crying black tears and shivering beneath the gossamer shift she wore. Absently, Kreed remembered that humans found temperatures such as those in the sacellum chamber discomforting, but he was not inclined to address the matter.

'Up,' he told her, beckoning Sahzë to her feet. 'Quickly now. You must make the connection before the transit is complete, or else the other astropaths in the fleet may sense it.'

Sahzë climbed unsteadily to her full height, listing as if she were drunk. The woman touched her belly. 'It burns me,' she told him. 'How much longer must I carry this burden, Kreed?' The astropath sounded out his name, turning it into a keening, feline yowl.

He studied her. The warp flask implanted in her flesh was eating her from the inside, and the agony was intense; but she had much yet to do and he told her so, ignoring Sahzë as her weeping began

anew. ‘Let me speak to him,’ Kreed commanded.

The astropath shuddered as the flask opened inside her. Without the need to pretend in front of the Word Bearers, the woman shrieked in pain and vomited up ectoplasm in puffs of white vapour and the pink mist of spittle and blood. Sahzë stumbled back down to her knees, her cries becoming growling and guttural, and Kreed listened to the crackle of her joints as her bones locked against one another in spasm.

A face formed in the smoke, and it resembled Horus Lupercal. A mouth opened, cloudy lips moving. ‘Report,’ it demanded.

‘We are underway,’ Kreed said, bowing low. ‘The assemblage is great, Warmaster. Almost all of the IX Legion heeded their primarch’s call.’

‘The rest we will cull when this is done,’ offered the face. ‘Baal will burn again, and this time for good.’

‘Sanguinius has accepted your words as the truth,’ continued the Acolyte. ‘He has committed his sons to the battle and they follow him without question.’

‘Of course.’ The smoke-face shifted, becoming hard-edged and planar. ‘He trusts me. The greatest weapon, given freely.’ A curl of cold amusement appeared and disappeared. ‘The ease of this… Once one moves past the horror of betrayal, it is so very potent.’ Suddenly, the face turned and Kreed was beneath the full power of its scrutiny, undimmed by the great distances between them. ‘You understand, Word Bearer, Sanguinius is loyal but he is not a fool. If… *when* he suspects, he will become the most dangerous enemy to our endeavours.’

Kreed stiffened. ‘He has no reason to do so. The Blood Angels believe to a man that they go to face the xenos. By the time they understand that the reality facing their Legion is quite different, it will be too late.’

‘See to it,’ the face told him, dissipating into icy haze.

Kano’s cell was roomy, as such chambers went, easily large enough for a pair of neophytes to call it home. It was a hold-over from his previous duties in the Librarius, a compact and spare cabin on the ventral decks of the *Red Tear* with walls of heavy iron, a good pallet and an arming rack erected in the far corner. Before the Decree of Nikaea had prohibited psychic warfare among the ranks of the Blood Angels, men like Kano – the Lexicania, Epistolaries and Codiciers – had been granted the use of cells like this one. Inside, they could meditate and hone their gifts in a place of relative serenity. Such a sanctum, as small as it was, had great value and while others without Kano’s gifts could use them as well, they did not connect to the peace they instilled in quite the same way. After the edict, many of the former psykers now shared the same dormatoria as their non-operant battle-brothers, but the use of the meditation cells was still open to them.

Kano had no doubt that the Wardens watched closely whenever a former member of his select kindred came to the cells. As he sat there, moderating his breathing, part of him wondered if even now Annellus or one of his kind was being alerted as to Kano’s appearance. He dismissed the idea; the opinions of Yason Annellus were not his concern.

He disconnected from the events of the past few days. Kano closed his eyes, allowing his implanted catalepsean node to negate any need for sleep. He entered an alpha state, and there in the halls of his calmed mind, he reached for a zone of tranquillity

In the days ahead, he told himself, he would need to remember such a moment of calm, so he might

focus and bring the full power of his warrior's wrath to the xenos.

This was the mantra circling through his thoughts when the deck beneath his boots broke apart like brittle ice and he fell through into a footless hall of black air.

Gravity claimed Kano and dragged on him with invisible chains, while stinking winds buffeted his body. The air currents reeked of slaughterhouse odour, pulling violently at his robes as if they wished to strip him naked and then to the bone.

He was falling forever, and the crack in the deck that had swallowed him up was gone. Now there was nothing but the yawning, howling darkness and a torrent of ashen flecks that hung suspended like snowflakes in an updraft.

A fragment of Kano's mind – a faraway piece of him, as distant to this experience as his body was to the far-flung deserts of his birth on Baal – knew that he was dreaming this. He was in the throes of a vision, wrenched out of his flesh and projected into a realm of spirits and symbols; but one no less real, no less lethal.

It was *the warp*. Inside the starship, despite acres of adamantium and the power of protective Geller fields, regardless of his own innate mental barriers, the sheer psychic force of the immaterium was dragging Kano back into himself. The touch of it forced his mind into places he had denied, made him re-ignite fires that had burned out and become cold embers.

He struggled, desperate to disengage and revert to the meat-and-blood reality of the waking world. The dream would not let him go.

The ash-flecks melted into drops of scarlet and Kano continued to fall, faster and faster now, beyond all true velocity, becoming a comet of flesh through the dark. Instinctively he knew that somewhere below there was an ending to this, an immeasurable surface upon which he would smash like a doll made of porcelain. He would be shattered.

But he could arrest the fall with a thought. All he needed to do was break the edict. Let the fires of his mind burn again. Kano could hear that thought coming from outside his head, so powerful it was. It echoed through the darkness, offering him hope and escape.

And if he did… what then? He swore an oath to deny his preternatural powers, and the echo of that vow was still strong, buried just below the surface of his thoughts. He could not betray it, he would not allow himself to show weakness.

The rumble of air around Kano shifted in tone, becoming louder, deafening. The fall was ending. He was very close now. It would be over soon, and he would die there, trembling on the floor of the iron cell, dashed against the walls of his own mind. To die in the dream was to perish in the real.

In those last moments, he saw a shape. A human figure, or something that attempted to be so. It was coming up out of the darkness, straight towards him, and it was screaming.

The figure was a man, a warrior in heavy armour that glistened with wet crimson and hellish red radiance. Blackened hair trailed from his head, and he was surrounded by a halo of giddy, coruscating lightning that threw off sparks of sickening false-colour radiation. He was buoyed on the poisonous windstorm, raised aloft by a pair of massive wings unfolding from his back, and they were drenched in vitae. Every feather was dripping with purple fluids, and Kano knew it was tainted blood, spilling from the veins of the screaming, red-stained angel.

The shrieking cadence from his lips pierced Kano's soul, reached inside his mind and hammered at his reason. They were spiralling towards one another, heartbeats away from collision; and in that instant, their gazes met. He saw fear in those eyes, fear and hate and other, darker things.

Then the screams became his own and his hands came up to shield his face as the blurred figure filled his vision–

Kano awoke.

He rolled over, sweat slick across his dark skin, the aftershock of adrenaline coursing through his trans-human form. The walls of the meditation cell came into sharp focus and he blinked, regaining some sense of where he was.

'Brother Kano,' said a languid, flat voice. He turned and found a hunchbacked servitor standing in the doorway, one of the maintenance helots that worked the chambers on this tier. It regarded him with idiot eyes. 'I was alerted by sounds of distress. Are you unwell? Do you require a medicae?'

'Get out,' he barked at it.

'Compliance,' said the machine-slave, with no variance in tone. It ambled around in a circle and wandered away.

With care, Kano got to his feet and moved to the refresher unit, taking some water to wash his face and then cup to his mouth to drink.

He found it curiously hard to look up into the mirror, and when he did, he saw nothing untoward; but the vivid dream-vision he had seen lurked behind his eyes and was not easily dismissed.

A red-stained angel of pain. What was the meaning of this image? Was his mind trying to process some fragment of warp echo that had crossed into his thoughts? Had he experienced some omen of ill-fate?

Kano snorted and tried to reject the image. Omens and portents were the remit of primitives and religionists, not a rational warrior of the secular Imperium. They were…

They were…

He blinked and looked at his reflection again, as something returned to him from the dream-vision.

The eyes. The eyes were known to him.

'Stiel,' called the battle captain. 'To me! Or do my words have little merit to you?' The words were harsh and full of broken fricatives, the combative tongue of Fenris lacking the glossy rhythm of standard Imperial Gothic.

The seer looked away from the patch of dull metal bulkhead that had been occupying his sight and met Redknife's gaze. 'Forgiveness, jarl,' he said. 'My thoughts were disturbed by our passing into the ghost-realm.'

'Be sure our angelic hosts are not aware of that,' Redknife warned. 'The black-armoured one watches you for witchery.'

Stiel gave a thin smile, pulling at the ink-vine scar that crossed the length of his face. 'My deeds are as opaque as my words. They can see through neither unless I wish it.'

The captain did not return his amusement. 'You underestimate our cousins, skald. Their gold and jewels mask a killer's soul, and we would do well to remember that.'

The Rune Priest stood and began a slow orbit of the dormitory chambers. Unlike the spartan spaces aboard Space Wolves vessels, the quarters aboard the Blood Angels ship were fabricated with a degree of artistry that Stiel found interesting but ultimately needless. He picked up a water goblet from a nearby table; even that seemed detailed with decoration beyond the need for such a common object.

‘We know what must be done, brothers. From this moment onwards, a Space Wolf must be within reach of the Angel at all times.’ Redknife continued his address to the rest of his squad, each of them collected in a close group around the captain. Only one other stood away from them, at a guardian stance near the door that led into the corridors beyond.

The legionary gave Stiel a nod. So far, no Blood Angel or Legion serf had come within earshot of their conversation. Even though they spoke in the near-impenetrable words of the old tongue, it was important they not be overheard; one of Redknife’s Techmarines had swept the chamber for monitoring devices the moment they had arrived there.

‘Those were Malcador’s orders,’ said Stiel. ‘Until he countermands them.’

‘*If* he countermands them,’ Redknife replied.

The Rune Priest halted, and the question that had been pressing at him since the moment they set off for the Nartaba system pushed to the front of his thoughts. ‘Have we considered… if we enact our orders to the full letter… What will become of us?’

‘That is obvious, skald,’ said one of the other Wolves, a young blade named Valdin. ‘We will die. They will kill us all. Did you think there would be any other outcome?’

Stiel ignored the comment. ‘He will want to see us. The Angel. He will ask us the same questions as the Guard Commander.’

‘I will give Sanguinius the same answers,’ Redknife told him.

‘You will lie to the brother of Russ?’ said the psyker. ‘*To his face?*’

Redknife’s eyes became flinty. ‘I did not say there would be honour in it. I said I would do it. Malcador ordered this, by the Emperor’s fiat and the Great Wolf’s agreement.’ He stood and crossed to Stiel. ‘Do you understand, brother? I know what I have accepted in this duty. I know what it means. If the runes fall poorly, I know it will be dishonourable and marked with bloodshed. But I do it just the same, for the Allfather.’ He sighed. ‘Our deaths are assured. But we must do this. We must be ready to enact the ultimate sanction upon Sanguinius, if the moment comes.’

Stiel shook his head. ‘I hear you say the words and I obey. But I cannot accept that we might attempt to kill a…’ He faltered, unable to say the words.

The import of what remained unspoken hung heavy in the air. Slowly, the captain reached out his hand and placed it on the skald’s shoulder. ‘We are the only ones who can carry this duty,’ said Redknife, and suddenly there was sorrow in his tone. ‘This is the burden of the Space Wolves, the reason we were made in Russ’s image. We are the executioner’s sons, bred to do the unthinkable, to fight the impossible battles. It is why we are here.’ He looked away, grimly taking in the faces of his men. ‘It is why our battle-brothers followed the Great Wolf against the Crimson King to censure him for his sorcery.’

Stiel found a sudden jolt of understanding in his commander’s words. ‘The witch-lord Magnus disobeyed, and we are here to make sure that Sanguinius does not do the same.’

‘If one son can defy his father…’ Redknife gave a nod, his hand dropping away. ‘That is the matter of it, skald. And know too that we are not the only ones. Other jarls are on other ships, or else in transit, seeking to place themselves in line-of-sight to all of the Emperor’s sons. To be ready. To *watch*.’

The thought of such a thing, of such further betrayal, sickened the Rune Priest, but he pushed the sensation away. ‘The Blood Angels would slit our throats for even daring to voice such a possibility.’

‘True. So we will remain silent and stand sentinel.’

‘And what of Magnus the Red?’ said Valdin. ‘We were far from Prospero when these orders came to us. We have no word of what followed the Wolf King’s reprimand of the magician.’

‘Aye,’ muttered Stiel. ‘Are we to mention nothing of the Thousand Sons and their misdeeds?’

‘What could we say?’ Redknife asked him. ‘That the Sigillite keeps this truth silent on Terra? If that were common knowledge, there would be mayhem. No, Valdin is right. We do not know the full scope of what has transpired, either to incur the Emperor’s displeasure or the punishment of Prospero.’ He nodded once again. ‘For now, the matter of Magnus’s disobedience will not be revealed to the Blood Angels. We will stand to, and we will wait.’ The captain looked away. ‘And in the name of Fenris, I beg the fates that we will not have to do anything at all.’

FIVE

Sight
Something Like a Name
Remnants

He was falling forever.

That had never happened before, not in centuries of war. On myriad worlds, in a thousand different skies, he had never fallen. It was not possible, it defied reality.

I cannot fall, he told himself, but even as the words formed in his mind, he tasted the sour untruth of them. Gravity, heavy as regret, had him in its thrall, pulling him down and down into an abyss beyond reckoning. There was a blackness surrounding him that had no depth to it, so stygian and formless that even his superhuman senses could register nothing of its scope or scale. The raging, shrieking torrents of air ripping past him beat hard against his face, his limbs, his torso. The generous cut of the robes he wore had turned them into flails, the heavy cloth snapping at him, beating his flesh. Ornate medallions, honours and battle tokens were ripped from their mountings, and they tumbled away in blinks of gold, pearl and red jade, parchment tapers flapping behind them. The impossible fall was trying to tear him out of his adornment, pare him down to what he was at his core. Skin, bone and spirit.

His senses filled with the hurricane noise of the winds and the foul, clogging stink of the air. A portion of his mind sifted the scent by reflex, breaking the streams of it into levels and sub-components. An overpowering odour of old blood, clotting and polluted like fouled oil, the sour midden-pit bass of shit and decaying meats, a warzone's cordite-stew of fycelene and spent promethium, dead flowers and burned sand. Each polluted breath sickened him, forcing him to isolate his gag reflex with a muscle-twitch.

Particles of wet ash – or were they? – rained past, floating as if suspended in the foetid air. They blossomed into speckles of liquid as he struck them. When he spun about, trying to wipe the stinging little impacts from his bare skin, bright crimson blood, rich with the colour and warm to his touch, streaked across his long-fingered hands.

And still he was turning, wheeling, falling.

I cannot fall, he told himself.

The refrain grew into a sound – not words, but an angered snarl of defiance. He tore at the robes around his chest and his back, balling bunches of the material in his fists, ripping at it. The fabric parted with a sound like shredding muscle and the hungry updraft took it away; a flicker of motion swallowed by the dark.

He knew it was a dream, and yet he did not. These two conflicting truths existed in his mind at once, each pulling against the other, but neither so strong as to shatter the reality that was unfolding. The pathway back towards the real was high up above, within reach if only… if only…

His clawed at his back and with shock, he found only broken stubs of bone protruding from beneath the planes of his shoulder blades. Where two magnificent wings had once risen to cleave the sky, pitiful stubs of cracked white drooled slick trails of spilled marrow. He touched raw, exposed nerves and torn arteries, and a scream boiled in his chest, trying to escape his lips.

He swallowed it and his vision fogged, the sudden sickening truth filling him with icy certainty. Struggling, he turned inwards, trying to find the way to break his mind free of the torment it had created. The dream would not let him go.

Faster and faster, until the speed became immeasurable, he cannoned through the yawning, endless chasm towards the ending that had to be hiding far below.

I cannot fall. Now the words sounded foolish and misguided, like the insistence of a primitive who believed that sunrise would not come unless he offered a sacrifice to make it so.

Without his wings, he was… what?

The same as all the rest of them? A hobbled parody of his former self, a spectre, a pale warning?

Rage flared in his chest, detonating like a bomb-blast. A red haze of instantaneous fury boiled through him, and he saw it in his veins, invisible threads of intent churning and intertwining with the spirals of his gene-matter. Anger unlocking something dark and monstrous inside his spirit; two great shadows lurching forwards.

One rising fast, growing large, red as hell and screaming its thirst for blood.

Another, coiling in the distance, yet to truly form, as black as space and blinding in the terrifying madness of its rage.

'No!' The shout echoed without ending. He held up his hands to stop them, deny them. 'I… cannot… fall!'

The echoes rebounded off a shape in the gloom below, a thing of speed and sinuous curves, flashing slick darkness, coming towards him on sails that cut the stinking air. Rising towards him. Screaming. Bleeding.

A warrior, ironclad and daubed head-to-toe in crimson vitae, the glow of dead singularities and murdered stars enveloping him, nauseating light leaking from the joints and cracks in his sundered armour. Ashen tresses stark about his howling, unknowable face; and against the surging current of poison air, the skeletal wings of a carrion eater reaching from his back.

Each feather of the pinion was soaked to the core with polluted blood, trails of it streaming away behind into a new storm. The screaming, red-stained angel was reaching for him, coming up to meet him. Brimming with hateful reproach and accusation.

He knew that this hate was deserved. In his hearts, he knew it without hesitation or compromise. The shrieks of abject pain were razors over his spirit, stoking growth of the black and red shadows.

He could not stop the fall. They spiralled close, the impact impossible to escape; and in that instant, their gazes met.

He saw fear and hate and other, darker things.

He saw a Red Angel–

The primarch's eyes snapped open, and if Azkaellon or any of the other Sanguinary Guard had been looking at him at that precise moment, they might have captured the sight of a micro-expression upon his face that broke the beatific lines of his countenance.

He looked inwards, and his perfect sense of the passage of time told him that only instants had

passed between the moment he closed his eyes and then opened them again. A few seconds at the most; but then linear time meant nothing in dreams, or in the warp. In that way, both places were the same, and not for the first time, Sanguinius wondered how close the connections between the sea of sleep and the immaterium really were.

The dream; it could not be a coincidence that it had come to him, here and now, outside the bounds of his usual regimen of meditation and inner reflection. They were deep in warp-space, surrounded on all sides by growing storm fronts of wraithlike energy. The Legion's Navigators had been pushed hard to steer the fleet across such a great transgalactic distance, and the unstable topography of the ethereal realm had not been with them.

The Angel's flash of emotion – perhaps sorrow, perhaps fury – passed in the blink of an eye and his hands relaxed from the fists they had made. At last the Guard Commander sensed something and cocked his head, a quizzical expression forming on his face. 'My lord?'

'How long?' Sanguinius leaned forwards in his control throne and indicated the viewing portal across his chambers, heading off any further questions. The far wall was part of the great dorsal hull tower of the *Red Tear*, an angled plane open to space through a massive dome of armourglass and ribbed plasteel. On the other side of the thick transparent barrier, out past the shining membrane of the battle-barge's Geller fields, a boiling sea of madness forever churned and spat, lashing at the human starships as the grand fleet passed through its domain.

'Any moment now, sir.' Azkaellon peered discreetly at a monitor panel built into the vambrace of his battle armour.

Sanguinius did not acknowledge the reply, his focus momentarily elsewhere. The dream-instance had been broken, but the sense of it clung on to him, as if he had brought a measure of the experience back with him into the waking world. Sense memory of the winds and their foetor dwelled in his thoughts, and worse still was the horrible echo of the emptiness that he had felt for his lost wings.

The Angel did not dismiss the dream as some might, as a random collection of harmless images created by the repose of an active mind. There was always more, lurking in the symbology and portents.

The sight of the Red Angel troubled Sanguinius, and he wondered after his brother Angron, for that name had, on occasion, been hung upon the warlord of the World Eaters. But even as the thought formed, he knew it was erroneous. Angron's vital, elemental rage was not what he had felt in the vision; it was something different, something personal. That he did not know what it was troubled him greatly.

Sanguinius looked up and gazed through the armourglass dome, out into the warp. It seemed to swirl around the triangular bow of the *Red Tear*, forming a rippling tunnel down which the Blood Angels fleet raced; but no, not a tunnel. *A pit*.

The image swam and the primarch's jaw set as his perception altered. The fleet was suddenly spiralling into an abyssal deep, diving into the yawning nothingness.

'I cannot fall.' He was unsure if the words had actually left his lips in a low whisper, or merely played out in his mind; then it became a moot point as a chime sounded from the speaker grilles hidden in the corners of the primarch's chamber, the devices disguised by the sculpted faces of silver cherubim.

'*All hands, this is the Admiral*.' DuCade's voice was strong and clear, but the stressor harmonics buried within – indicators of a deep fatigue – were not lost on the Angel. '*Prepare to translate*.

Brace for return to realspace.'

Azkaellon glanced at his wrist-auspex once more. 'All ships are reporting ready. Our objective lies before us.' The Guard Commander looked up as a sheet of brilliant emerald-green lightning washed over the bow of the *Red Tear*. A massive, planet-sized torus of smoky non-matter puckered and opened ahead of the flotilla to reveal black sky and the distant stars beyond.

Then the warp was gone, a fast-fading memory, and the ships of the massed Blood Angels warfleet thundered back into realspace. Shedding great bow-waves of exotic particles and extreme energies, the flagship and her sister vessels deployed in good order, expanding out into a huge conical formation.

Sanguinius left the command throne and walked to the dome to watch the intricate dance of his starships, each captain performing flawlessly as the fleet became a great dagger poised and ready in the night. He bid Lohgos to hold the ship-to-ship vox-channels open, so that he might listen to the crosstalk between the vessels. In his mind's eye, the Angel saw the motion of the fleet elements like a dozen games of regicide, one atop another, as each craft found its place for the coming battle. The complexity and the art of it soothed him like the music of a fine symphony. There was such beauty in all things, if only one knew where to look.

A crimson star hung high against the velvet dark, shining hard. Signus Alpha was a red giant of no marked abnormality, a vector at the end of many a colonist's journey out here to the galactic rim. Rendered smaller by distance was the far blue sun Signus Gamma, and barely visible with it the white dwarf Signus Beta. As before at the rendezvous point, this was a system at the edge of a spiral arm, but further up the curve. From the approach angle chosen by the Blood Angels, the stars and their planetary cluster seemed to lie against a bed of pure, seamless black. The ghost halo of an Oort cloud glistened far above and below, and there were shimmers of strong albedo here and there where the glow of the trinary suns reflected off the planets turning in their long orbital paths.

'The Signus Cluster,' announced Zuriel, speaking it aloud for the record of the vox-thieves and hololithic recorders that documented the *Red Tear*'s missions. 'Combined Expeditionary Fleet Group, insertion begins. This record made in the name of the Imperium and the IX Legion Astartes.'

Sanguinius spoke to a vox-bead concealed in the gorget of his armour. 'Admiral, begin standard communications protocols. Scan deep for ship-sign or perimeter drones.'

'*Your will*,' she replied.

'Imager,' ordered the primarch, and from above a slender brass rod unfolded like a spider-leg, reaching down from the ceiling to present the glassy head of a holograph emitter. With a mutter of microscopic lenses, the device projected a globe of ghostly blue light several metres across; a tactical map of the Signus system, mimicking in miniature the current positions of the planetary bodies in the cluster.

'Seven worlds, fifteen moons…' Azkaellon mused, approaching his master from behind. 'Most likely all of them in enemy hands.' As he spoke, the hololith cycled through a series of attack profiles, showing the optimum transit vectors for the Expeditionary Fleet.

'My compliments to the Navigators,' Sanguinius noted. 'Our exit point is exactly as predicted.' He reached into the image and it rippled slightly, as if he were touching the surface of a still pool. The Angel's index finger traced the orbit of the outermost planet. 'If we continue on this heading, we will cross inside the trajectory of Phorus within the day.'

Uttering the name of the colony world caused the imager to unfold a virtual scroll of text above the

ghostly orb marking Phorus's current location. Data on the geology of the rocky, airless outpost, census reports and more information streamed past.

Azkaellon studied the tactical plot. 'If the flotilla remains gathered, we can pass close to one, perhaps two of the other planets before we close on the capital.'

'I won't break up the fleet, not yet,' said the primarch. 'But circulate alternate deployment plans to the squadron leaders and command wing officers. If it becomes necessary to split the approach or throw a ring of steel around the cluster, I want my warships ready to execute the order at a moment's notice.'

'Admiral DuCade has prepared some options.'

Sanguinius nodded, still studying the image. 'I'm sure she has.'

Past the orbit of Phorus, there was a wide gap of several light-minutes until the frigid sphere of Holst. Unlike the barren, cratered surface of the most distant planet, Holst had been fully colonised by the Imperium. The ringed, blue-white world was rich in gas ice, and beneath the mantle of a thin nitrogen atmosphere, chemical refineries dotted the surface alongside massive hive-cities to house the workers that toiled to harvest the metallic slush for the engines of empire. The remains of a third planet, believed by the Mechanicum's own scouts to be the heavy core and broken moons of a collapsed gas giant, formed an asteroid belt breaking the plane of the Signus ecliptic in two. The locals had a colloquial name for the belt; they called it the 'White River', on account of the high solar reflectivity of the asteroids that comprised it.

The cluster's inner region of planets, those that fell within the acceptable parameters for null- or low-exertion atmospheric modification, were a trio of Terran-sized worlds. Two were bread-basket colonies – the windswept agricultural settlement of Scoltrum and Ta-Loc, a stormy ocean world – and the third was the densely populated capital planet of Signus Prime, the fleet's ultimate destination.

Past the life zone, closer in towards the red sun, lay Signus Tertiary and the innermost planet, Kol. Both worlds had some human population, but they were radiation-soaked stones home only to small outposts and ore mines.

Sanguinius and his commanders had spent days poring over the maps and data from the Signus Cluster in the wake of the Warmaster's orders, considering how an enemy like the nephilim might annex each planet and turn it to their use. The Angel theorised that they would flock to the temperate worlds first, taking the capital and the harvest-planets, bedding in there until every human voice on the surface was either silenced or crying for them behind one of their obscene flesh-masks.

'The magnetic field of Signus Gamma will partially mask our approach,' Azkaellon was saying. 'If the xenos have ships on picket duty, there's a good chance we will be able to close to kill range before they are aware of us.'

'Have the forward scout elements progress to attack range of the outer planet,' Sanguinius replied. 'All non-fleet vessels are to be considered enemy combatants until indicated otherwise. I want to be informed the moment any contact is encountered.'

The chime sounded again. '*My lord?*'

Sanguinius immediately heard the alteration in the timbre of Admiral DuCade's voice, and he shot a look at Azkaellon, who had picked up the shift in nuance as well. The analysis of the words was reflexive, as instant as breathing to them. The primarch wasted no time on preamble. 'What's wrong?'

DuCade didn't ask how he knew; she had been in his service long enough to understand that the Blood Angels simply sensed things faster than a normal human being. '*Initial scans of local space*

read no drive plumes or energy displacement congruent to that of Imperial ship classes or known nephilim power signatures.'

The primarch raised an eyebrow. He knew there was more. 'Go on.'

'*Extreme range sensors are reading metallic objects adrift off the port beam, closer to Phorus. At my discretion, I have diverted a scout to investigate.*'

'Your hypothesis?'

'*They are most likely derelict ships, Lord Sanguinius. No power or life signs. We're reading the by-products of multiple weapons barrages in that zone and…*' DuCade paused, as if she were struggling to find the right words. '*Some anomalous energy readings*.'

'What about machine-call signals?' said Azkaellon, as his master walked through the shimmering hololith and to the bowed windows of the observation dome.

'*No detections*.' There was something else underlying the admiral's speech pattern, and it was unfamiliar to both the primarch and his Guard Commander. They shared a look as they processed her statement.

In any colonised star system, even one under strict military control, there would be a sphere of vox-communications passing back and forth between starships and orbital stations, bleed-through from commercial data networks, even the low frequency traffic of civilian broadcasts. It was virtually impossible to silence the voices of a single planet, let alone seven of them.

'I would suggest the astropaths commune and seek for their kindred,' offered Azkaellon. 'The invaders may have enforced a system-wide vox-blackout.'

When DuCade spoke again, the primarch realised he was detecting something in her tone he had not heard her express; she was afraid. '*Agreed. The communications channels are… They are active, but there is nothing there*.' She gave an exasperated sound. '*Forgive me, lords. I've never encountered this before*.'

'Let me hear it,' said Sanguinius.

'*One moment*.'

There was a dull crackle as the audio channels switched, and then a wash of noise, slow and sullen, emerged from the lips of the silver-faced cherubs. The sound was the static of dead space, the neutral mutter of background radiation projected into the void by the Signusi stars and the countless trillions of other radioactive sources that made up the noise of the universe.

And yet, it wasn't. 'The tone is all wrong.'

The words came from Mendrion, who stood off to one side. He had been silent and stoic in his position at the command throne's side for hours, and yet the sound through the speakers drew him to speak his thoughts aloud without pause.

Sanguinius nodded. 'Yes.' The static surf had a component to it that was ghostly and intangible. The primarch listened hard, his keen mind and improved senses extending into the noise in a way that a non-augmented human like DuCade would never have been capable of. There was something in there, buried so deep in the sound that even he could not fully grasp it. No one in the chamber dared to breathe as the Angel strained to truly *hear*.

It slipped from him, fading and retreating each time he tried to focus on it. Was that a whisper he heard, a name? A paracusic sibilant, as distant as if it were a shout on the far side of the world. His lips thinned in frustration, and finally he relented, making a throat-cutting gesture.

'That's enough, admiral,' said Azkaellon, and the signal died abruptly.

‘*What do you make of that, gentlemen*?’ said DuCade, her cool demeanour returning.

‘I want a detail of vox-monitors to maintain a full watch rotation, until otherwise noted,’ Sanguinius told her. ‘If this is some xenos trick, we would do well to keep a weather eye on it. In the meantime, proceed as planned.’

‘*So ordered. DuCade out*.’

‘What in Baal’s name was that sound?’ Lohgos said quietly. ‘Mark me, my skin crawled to hear it...’

‘Some form of communications countermeasure, nothing more,’ Azkaellon insisted, his tone firm.

Sanguinius looked to each of his honour guard in turn, searching their faces for a reaction to what they had just heard. His gaze held on Mendrion’s frown. ‘Do you concur?’

The Sanguinary Guard stiffened, his moment of introspection vanishing. ‘Aye, lord. It must be as the Guard Commander says, a denial tactic of the nephilim.’

The primarch turned away, although it was unclear if he was satisfied with the answer. ‘Azkaellon, contact all wing commanders and Legion captains. I want a full status report from all fleet elements before we pass inside the limit of Phorus’s orbit, and tactical evaluations from the scout ships.’

Azkaellon saluted crisply and the rest of the Sanguinary Guard mirrored his actions. Mendrion’s mailed fist rose to his chest only a fraction of a second slower than those of his squadmates and his expression hardened.

The vox-noise was difficult to forget; even now, the memory of it was there at the back of his thoughts, lodged in his mind like a splinter. He dismissed it with a small effort, blotting it out with the recollection of a martial symphonic piece he had heard at a recital many years ago, at a muster on Vanaheim.

Foolish, he thought, to attribute patterns where there were none. For a moment, Mendrion had believed that he heard a voice swimming deep in that ocean of white noise, a crack-throated murmur or a snake-hiss. Something with the shape of a name, but not real, not actual. He dismissed the moment, letting the memory of the music smother it.

Marching after his commander, Mendrion let the word slip away and within moments the name had been forgotten.

The portside cruiser bay in the *Red Tear*’s ventral sail was cleared to allow the frigate *Numitor* to have the docking cylinder to itself, and as a precaution all auxiliaries and non-combatant crew were dismissed to other duties. The scout ship hung in the middle of the vast space, bright beams of light bathing its flanks in splashes of stark illumination. The *Numitor*’s crew had agreed to remain embarked while a party of medicae servitors led by Warden Berus moved through the craft in sealed armour, examining every one of them and taking detailed reports of what they had discovered in the wreck zone.

Meros paused at the wide airgate and donned his helmet, locking it to the neck seal of his armour. He heard a high-pitched squeak of air pressure as the ring bit tight, and a string of active icons flashed in his peripheral vision. The atmosphere inside the chamber drained away, deadening sound until there was only the faint hum of the armour’s internal systems and the rasp of the Apothecary’s own breathing.

He glanced at the other Blood Angels standing around him. Across the airlock, his company commander Captain Furio was in silent conversation with the one of the *Red Tear*’s complement of

Apothecaries, their words being carried on a frequency that only they shared. A handful of Space Marines from Brother-Sergeant Madidus's squad were there, but most of the group were medicae, drawn from dozens of units by a brisk summons with little explanation as to the reason. Meros wondered why armed battle-brothers were needed to escort a medical party on the deck of the primarch's own flagship, but he kept his question to himself. Already, barrack-room hearsay had spread among the Legion that *Numitor* and the other scouts had discovered something unusual among the wrecked ships drifting beyond the edges of the Signus Cluster.

The airgate's far hatch inched silently open, and Furio's voice clicked on over the general channel. 'Void action protocols are in effect. Gravity systems are active on the docks but don't stray too close to the frigate.'

Meros looked out and saw the *Numitor* drifting in the null zone in the middle of the wide open bay, like a vast red and silver dagger at rest on an arming rack. Tethers and gantries held it in place before a yawning maw that opened into space. At this angle, he could just see the point of the *Red Tear*'s bow far overhead. But his attention was immediately taken by the lines of black polyplas containers arranged in careful rows across the service deck. Meros recognised the familiar shape of the collapsible coffin pods; many times he had been called upon to seal the bodies of the recently dead inside similar containers.

'Our brothers–?' For an instant, one of the other Apothecaries forgot protocol and spoke out over the general vox.

The expressionless mask of Captain Furio's helm shook once. 'These casualties are not of our number. No lives were lost.' He let that sink in and then went on. 'Each of you has an assigned number of bodies. You will examine them and then pool your findings. Observe all biohazard procedures, report anything anomalous immediately. Begin.'

Meros followed his comrades out on to the service deck and found the four coffins set aside for him to examine. Pausing to re-check the seals on his armour, he activated the medicae gauntlet around his right forearm and brought its scanner heads to an active state. The Apothecary Minoris who had spoken out of turn was nearby, with his own group of dead to scrutinise. He glanced at Meros, and there was a click in his ears as the younger legionary voxed him on a discreet channel.

'Why are they doing this?' he asked. 'Why have they brought these corpses back here, if they fear there is some sort of contagion?'

'Standard operating procedure. The *Red Tear* has the most advanced medicae labs and technical facilities of any ship in the fleet,' said Meros.

The other Apothecary said nothing and cracked open one of the coffins with a puff of displaced air. Meros heard the thin hiss of an indrawn breath over the open channel.

Cautiously, he did the same. The lid of the container slid back and Meros found himself looking down on what seemed like a heap of clothing, curiously laid out in the shape of a person. The illuminator on his backpack flicked on and banished the shadows inside the coffin. It revealed first a lumpy mask of pinkish-grey that mocked the form of a human face, glittering slightly with a patina of oxygen ice.

Meros panned down the length of the coffin, his eyes narrowing behind his helmet optics as he attempted to fathom what he was looking at.

His first thought was of the eldar, and in sympathetic resonance, the healed wound in his gut tensed. The flesh-mask reminded him of the xenos reavers and the murderous play they indulged in with their

victims. Meros had seen them cut off the faces of their prey and sew them into cloaks, as trophies.

But this was not the same thing. The mass of flesh before him was whole and full. He reached in and snipped open the clothing shrouding the body, discovering that the corpse was actually a female; the state of it had made that less than obvious.

The medicae gauntlet's auspex ticked and whirred through its scan program, and the device's internal reservoirs of knowledge were equally unfamiliar with the manner of this death. The body lacked any kind of rigidity, it was sunken and shrivelled in a way that suggested a peculiar form of decay – and yet the auspex insisted that the body had been well preserved by the vacuum of space. He wondered if he had been given a corpse that had been flattened by some kind of great impact.

'I was told that the scouts found the wreckage of more than a dozen different craft drifting in Phorus's gravity shadow,' said the other Blood Angel. 'Civilian haulers, defence force monitors, shuttles. Many of them not even warp-capable. Trajectory suggested they were fleeing the inner worlds.'

Meros listened as he reached into the coffin, to take the hand of the dead woman.

'The ships had been torn apart.'

He nodded. 'The nephilim use displacement weapons. Very effective at close range.' Meros's hand touched the corpse and the woman's fingers were like streamers of rag, limp and wilted.

'No,' said the other Blood Angel. 'I mean literally torn apart. As if by some kind of shearing force.'

Meros was only half-listening as he kneaded the skin of the corpse's arm. It bent back and forth, without rigor or great resistance. A strange thought occurred to him, and with care, he drew his battle knife and cut into the dead woman's forearm, directly above the wrist. The blade passed easily through the meat of her, never changing in resistance. He peered at the strangely bloodless stump. He saw nerves, veins and arteries, muscles…

The Apothecary looked back at the body, at its strangely deflated, sagging shape. 'She has no bones.' He poked the flesh, feeling it give beneath his touch. He had to say it again to fix it in his thoughts. 'There are no bones in this corpse.'

He replaced the limb he had cut and went to the next coffin, then the next and the one after that. The others were all males, all garbed in ship-suits that identified them as crewmen from a fuel tender. Once more, the bodies had the same shrunken dimensions as the woman's corpse, the same flaccid limbs, collapsed torsos and heads. They were little more than bags of skin and meat in the shape of a human being, misshapen under the weight of their own mass.

He looked around and saw that his brothers were coming to the same conclusion. Every one of the dozens of bodies on the service deck was identical in the manner of death.

'Their blood has been altered,' said the junior Apothecary. He had drawn off a vial of the vitae, and he held it up to the light. Instead of a crimson fluid, the matter within the crystal tube was thick and sluggish, an oily paste almost purple in colour.

Meros stood up. 'How is this possible?'

'That is my question to you and your brothers.' A new voice came over the vox-channel as another warrior-commander approached them, Captain Furio at his side.

Meros recognised Captain Raldoron's laurels and insignia, and he bowed to the two veterans. 'My lords.'

'Answer him, Meros,' ordered Furio. 'That's why you are here.'

'I'll need to make a deeper analysis.' He hesitated. 'I confess I have never come across this manner

of injury.'

'Later,' Raldoron insisted. 'For now, I want your first impressions.'

'There are no entry wounds,' offered the other Apothecary. 'It's not as if someone opened them, removed their skeletons and sewed them closed again.'

'Could it be the result of a viral effect, or bio-weapon?' said Furio. 'Something that disintegrates human bone and cartilage.'

'No, sir.' Meros shook his head, thinking it through. 'That would leave waste matter inside the corpse. There would be bloating, the expression of toxic materials.' He paused for a moment. 'In theory, a freak teleportation effect might create something like this. But not so uniform, not over so many victims.' Meros gestured at the lines of coffins.

'These are just the ones the *Numitor* brought back.' Raldoron was grim. 'The frigate's commander informed me that they found hundreds scattered across a dozen derelicts, just like these poor souls.'

Meros felt a twist of revulsion in his gut. It was unimaginable to contemplate what kind of death these men and women had endured. Had they been… *aware* when it happened to them?

Furio glanced at Raldoron. 'We are clearly dealing with a new kind of xenos weapon, First Captain.'

Raldoron nodded once. 'I've seen enough. The primarch must be informed.' The cold, flinty lenses of his helmet scanned them. 'Word of what you have seen here is not to be discussed without permission from your commanding officer, is that clear?'

'Clear,' said the other Apothecary.

Meros took a moment longer to answer; he was remembering a moment many years before, another similar order from the First Captain after he had been in battle against the nephilim.

'So ordered,' he replied.

SIX

Fear
Phorus
The Stars Go Out

There was no place for Sanguinius on the bridge of his flagship. He had made it so; his command throne remained in his private sanctum in the upper reaches of the *Red Tear*'s dorsal tower, but for all intents and purposes there was no formal seat of power here for him. It was a small humility that had been enforced across the Blood Angels warfleet from the very beginning of his reign. The primarch refused to take the captain's chair of any craft in his fleet, lest it be seen as a diminishment of the authority of that vessel's commanding officer. He stood with one hand upon the high back of Admiral DuCade's station as the shipmistress governed her crew. He remained statue-still and silent; as did the members of his honour guard, who waited in recesses draped with crimson curtains to the port and starboard sides of the bridge deck.

The *Red Tear*'s command-and-control nexus resembled a small combat arena or a theatre in the round. At its lowest level, there were the primary operations consoles manned by DuCade and her prime cadre of naval officers. Then, raised up in three tiers like the stands for an audience, there were semi-circles of secondary and tertiary workstations for the rest of the command crew, the gunnery and engineering officers, the sensor specialists and more. Rather than raise the captain of the ship high above all things to look down on her men in the manner of some haughty queen at court, the admiral was at the centre of everything, the fulcrum of the starship and the fleet it led.

Only one being was allowed the honour of being placed above all. In the ceiling over their heads, a shallow bowl of silver metal worked with constellations and star-device etchings showed the lowermost surface of a habitat sphere, where the *Red Tear*'s Navigators lived in zero gravity. Locked away behind thick walls of sense-deadening baffles, with the ship in normal space the psykers were at rest, in a kind of dormant coma-state.

Their distaff cousins, the astropaths, were not so lucky. Their hab-module was deeper inside the warship's hull, protected by layers of heavy armour and energy barriers. Arcane technologies connected them to mechanisms for psychic thought-projection, infinitely byzantine systems that fascinated the primarch with their intricate complexity.

The word from the astropathic sanctum was not promising. Sanguinius had bid them to reach into the Signus Cluster with their minds and listen for the whisper of communiqués from others of their kind. The vox-dead static picked up by the fleet's machine-call transceivers troubled him more than he had revealed, and he had hoped that the telepaths might find some trace deeper into the star system – something to indicate that the Blood Angels had not arrived too late to save these worlds.

When he asked them what they heard, the psykers wept and spoke in synesthesic riddles, becoming so agitated that he became concerned they might harm themselves. In the end, without answers,

Sanguinius left them under guard and returned to the bridge. Whatever tricks his enemy had used to silence Signus seemed to extend into the ethereal as much as the real.

'I do not know what to make of this, my lord.' DuCade's voice brought him back from his moment of reverie. The admiral was offering him the pict-slate he had given to her a few minutes earlier. On its glassy surface, captures from the gun cameras of a Raven scrolled slowly past, showing frozen images of a field of wreckage and plasma spills against the void. 'The damage patterns resemble the effect of an explosive detonation deep inside the ship-frame.' She craned her neck to look up at him, the tiny woman surrounded by the broad metal cradle of her chair.

He nodded, threads of his blond hair falling over his face. 'My thoughts too,' agreed the Angel. 'But the scans show no signs of thermal damage, no traces common to a chemical or nuclear detonation.'

She nodded, frowning. 'No exotic particles either, which means it couldn't be an esoteric weapon, like a graviton shear or a conversion beamer.' DuCade looked away, silently giving an order to a junior officer with the tip of her head, without breaking the conversation. 'Those wrecks look like they were torn apart from the inside.'

'Like cages ripped open by a vicious animal.' Azkaellon hove closer, catching the edges of the conversation. He bowed slightly to his liege lord. 'I cannot understand how or why these craft were even in this zone of space. Most of them had no warp motors and were incapable of speeds beyond one-half light velocity, and yet they appeared to be making for interstellar space. It would have taken them centuries to reach the nearest star system, a millennium more to the closest Imperial world.'

'To answer that question, Guard Commander,' said DuCade, 'requires something the Legiones Astartes do not possess.'

'And that is?'

'*Fear*.' Sanguinius detected the shift in her pulse rate through a microscopic colour change in her pale cheeks and the motion of her thin hands. She went on. 'Consider this. The people on those ships were so afraid that they willingly sought out the embrace of the deep black. A prospect for slow starvation as their food supplies dwindled, suffocation or freezing at the failure of life-support.'

'Perhaps they held on to the hope of finding a rescuer out here,' said the primarch, for a moment trying to place himself in that mindset. 'But there was no one to aid them. No one to forestall the fate that ultimately claimed them.'

'They feared this death less than the terror that chased them from their homes,' offered Azkaellon, with a grimace. 'That notion is as alien to me as any xenos.'

'Admiral?' DuCade's augmented aide approached the commander. 'Bow observers report we are coming into visual range of the planet Phorus. Fleet speed is reducing as per your posted orders. We will cross the outer perimeter of the Signus system in approximately two minutes.'

'Sound battle stations throughout the flotilla,' she responded. 'Show me the planet.'

The officer saluted and turned to face the front of the command deck. 'Lens the eye!' At his order, the open bow of the semi-circular amphitheatre widened and the wide armourglass portals looking out into the dark shifted. The molecules of the clear material were stroked by electromagnetic charges that shifted the density and structure of the largest portal, a flawless disc set in an elliptical framework that resembled a human eye. The view outside sharpened, bringing the bow of the *Red Tear* into hard detail along with her escorts. The battleships *Ignis* and *Covenant of Baal* moved off the great barge's beam, and past them the light of Signus Alpha bent around the sphere of Phorus. Red-lit, it was a hazy shadow becoming more defined with each passing moment.

It was the primarch who first sensed that something was amiss. ‘Azkaellon,’ he said, beckoning the Guard Commander. ‘Do you see? The colour?’

The Sanguinary Guard shot a look at a nearby systems console, where one of the sub-light navigational crewmen was working. On the woman’s gas-lens screen there was a cogitator-generated image dredged up from the depths of the *Red Tear*’s commodious data mines; a picture assembled from probe readings and the logs of the Imperial colonial census office, the standard planetary catalogue entry for Signus VII, local designation Phorus.

The image showed an unremarkable ball of rock and ice, scarred by asteroid impact craters. It resembled a sphere made of porcelain webbed with jagged lines, as if dropped from a great height and then reassembled.

‘The reflectivity of it is wrong,’ Sanguinius told him.

Phorus’s dirty white colouration should have made it stand out starkly against the bloody light of the star, but instead the planet was drinking in all the illumination it was given, absorbing it.

‘All ships within lead element,’ called DuCade. ‘Target Phorus with sensing gear and report.’

Immediately, information began to stream into the *Red Tear*’s data buffers. Azkaellon saw dozens of support screens light up along the upper tiers as cogitators laboured to interpret the new readings.

‘Phorus was home to ninety thousand colonists,’ the primarch offered, his eyes on the forward portal. ‘But I fear no longer. Look at the surface.’

The Guard Commander’s perception caught up with what he was seeing and the image shifted in his mind’s eye. Phorus was not, as he had thought, caught in an partial eclipse of a star and so rendered dark by shadow.

The planet appeared *burned*, seared black from pole to pole. No features were visible, and all other colour was utterly absent.

‘Report from the *Ignis*,’ said DuCade’s aide. ‘They shot a probe into the planet’s gravity well. The drone shows no trace of atmospherics or ambient energy output.’

‘They were in the process of terraforming Phorus,’ insisted the Angel. ‘There will be signifiers.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ The major bowed slightly. ‘I mean, no, my lord. There’s nothing there. The probe’s telemetry shows a world that is completely dead. Lifeless. Right down to the microscopic level.’

Azkaellon watched his master become very still, the slight movement of his great wings folded against his armour the only motion from him.

‘Lord Sanguinius,’ said the admiral. ‘How do you wish to proceed? We’ll be crossing Phorus orbit in one minute.’

‘There’s nothing for us here,’ said the primarch, after a moment. ‘Maintain course and heading in towards the core of the system.’

The Guard Commander found he could not turn his gaze away from the corpse of a planet as it drifted past the bow of the *Red Tear*, falling level with the flagship as it passed into the system proper.

And then, like the eye of an ocean predator rolling slowly to follow the movement of a prey animal, Phorus *moved*.

Shifting in place, the black orb began to change aspect, turning against its normal rotation, the scorched surface rippling. Alarms sounded on a dozen consoles as sensor-servitors detected events that did not tally with any planetary motion known or predicted by their programmers.

Sanguinius surged forwards, coming to the armourglass of the portal, his hands pressing on the

clear barrier. ‘Admiral! Order the fleet to extend the distance from Phorus, now!’

‘What…’ Azkaellon struggled for a moment to frame his question, as DuCade snapped out the order behind him. ‘What is happening down there?’

‘I don’t know,’ his master replied, the answer sending a ripple of ice through him.

In plain sight of every starship of the Blood Angels fleet, Phorus turned and turned, passing through an impossibly fast day-night cycle, moving as if its connection to the laws of nature had been severed. The dark sphere finally found a kind of equilibrium, presenting what had been its southern polar regions to the *Red Tear* and all those who watched through viewports and screen-relays.

New colour, a violent flame-orange among the dead black, emerged in points of burning light across the curvature of Phorus’s ruined surface. If a being could have stood upon the planet and lived, they would have witnessed decapitated mountains painted soot-dark sinking into abyssal sinkholes, and great chasms opening up from horizon to horizon. Magma flame jetted high into the air, ejected from the deep core of the planet, hot enough that the hellish glow was visible from orbital space.

And from above – *only* from above – the full dimension of what was being wrought upon Phorus was slowly becoming clear. At first it seemed that the planet was suffering a sudden and inexplicable geological catastrophe. The gravity of the outpost world went into wild flux as cracks wider than the reach of oceans spread across the surface.

Planets died this way, collapsing under their own mass and breaking apart; it was a common occurrence if one thought in astronomical terms. But never like this, without warning or precursor, seemingly triggered by the arrival of an audience to witness it.

Phorus was not dying; this was something else entirely.

Following lines of circumference, the monstrous fissures spread about the planet, and against all reason they propagated in perfect rows, one crossing over the other, each of them slicing through layers of blackened rock and burned ice. Landmasses splintered in a mathematical symmetry that was too precise, too flawless to be the action of tortured nature. It seemed as if an invisible artisan of godlike scope cradled Phorus in claws of force, cutting lines into the ruined surface as a man might delicately slice into the skin of a ripe fruit.

It ended as swiftly as it had begun, the planet briefly possessing and then losing a new atmosphere as a huge volume of toxic gases escaped from the flaming rocky mantle, boiling into space. Phorus’s landscape had been grotesquely altered, sculpted into a web of magma-choked canyons, each broad enough to drown a hive-city. A grand design emerged from it all, at once seamless and horrific.

From the bridge of the *Red Tear* the sigil was clearly visible, burning like a brand upon the darkness. The lines of flame passed together and crossed over, one after another, so that they formed a brazen star with eight points.

The primarch broke the stunned silence that had fallen across the command deck, turning away from the smouldering corpse of the planet. ‘It’s a message.’

‘What does it mean?’ The major’s voice trembled.

‘Mark me,’ said Sanguinius, showing his teeth, ‘I will have the answer to that question, even if I must rip it from the throats of our enemies.’ He delivered the words with cold, feral intent. ‘If this is meant to unman us, the xenos have underestimated the will of the–’

‘My lord.’ Admiral DuCade rose from her command throne, and with one hand she pressed a vox-pod to her right ear. ‘A priority message from the heavy cruiser *Chalice*.’

Azkaellon recalled the ship's name; it was part of the fleet's sternguard force, trailing a few hundred kilometres back along the line of the formation. The primarch shot her a look as DuCade went on.

'And the same report from several others now…' The tinny mutter of overlapping communications signals was audible from the brassy pod. She held it away, trying to compose herself as best a woman could when she had such news to impart. 'Primarch, the captain of the *Chalice* and several picket ships around the edges of the flotilla are reporting the occurrence of an unusual astronomical phenomenon.'

Sanguinius turned back to the great portal and peered out, past the fires of ruined Phorus. Azkaellon came closer, and as he did he heard the Angel release a gasp.

Sanguinius pointed, raising his gauntlet to the void. 'There. Do you see it?'

The Guard Commander grimaced as he looked; then he too felt his breath catch in his throat. 'The stars…'

Beyond the baleful red glow of Signus Alpha and the shimmers of its sister suns, the scattering of stars and nebulae that lay within sight of the *Red Tear* were changing. Azkaellon had the sudden impression of a colossal curtain falling across a stage the size of a galaxy. A great veil, impenetrable and stygian, blotting out everything.

Struck silent, he stood at the Angel's side and watched the stars go out.

ULLANOR

Some say that the Triumph at Ullanor began with the echo of the first shot fired against the greenskin hordes of the Overlord Urlakk Urg, others that it was marked by the blood shed when Horus Lupercal pitched the monstrous alien from the balcony of the great keep, to die broken against the flagstones far below. In the end, it was only the victory that mattered, and the hard-fought road that millions of soldiers and hundreds of thousands of legionaries had cut into the heart of the ork onslaught.

The great mass of the xenos had threatened to break open the new bonds forged by the Great Crusade, and so a cohort of warriors from across the noble Legions came together to shatter this threat before it could spread beyond the sector, where the green tide rose with each passing day.

Under the command of Horus, the Luna Wolves took the fight to the heart of Urg's war machine, blinding the alien army with a massive feint. Even as his father, the Emperor, led the common soldiery and phalanxes of Titan battle walkers across Ullanor Majoris, it was Horus who struck the killing blow.

With Urg's termination the nascent ork empire self-destructed, and the xenos that were not hounded into the mud of Ullanor's vast battlegrounds would be hunted down across hundreds of star systems, all the way to Chondax, the Kayvas Belt and beyond.

The victory was sealed in blood and iron, and the call to Triumph was sounded. By the Emperor's command, Ullanor was remade as a trophy world, designated *Mundus Tropaeum* on all galactic maps and records of tithe. It would be a site of glory and spectacle to cement not only this single conquest over the forces ranged against humankind, but a greater symbol of the Crusade itself. For two hundred Terran years the Emperor's mighty endeavour had moved across the face of the galaxy to bring unity and illumination to the lost daughter-worlds of Old Earth. It had pushed back the night, re-forged old links between civilisations, battled alien threats – and with regret, it had often given punishment. A change was coming, though, a change that found its fulcrum on Ullanor.

None who walked upon that world knew that the echo of that Triumph would sound for decades, for centuries, *for millennia*.

Geoformer platoons from the Mechanicum brought world engines and mobile stone-burners to cut a massive swath across the broken landscape left in the battle's wake. Orkish dead were buried in their millions with their savage ruins, interred beneath transplanted rocks and the heads of crushed mountains. The Mechanicum eradicated every last remaining trace of the enemy and paved over them with a giant boulevard, a parade stage as wide as the footprint of some cities.

They built a highway and allowed only one structure to stand proud of the great platform – an ornamental pavilion of black marble and heavy granite that had been built piecemeal on Terra and then shipped across the void by special envoy. Marker posts decorated with the skulls of ork commanders paced out the length of the road, and behind them great bowls of smokeless promethium burned brightly, endlessly lighting the highway with their blue-white fire.

When the Mechanicum were finished, the honoured came to pay homage to the battle won, the Crusade's ideal and the one who was father to them all. The Imperial Army and the Titan Legions bracketed the gathering. Human troops were ranked in uncountable numbers, their host so wide they became a sea of battle armour and dress uniforms. Every common man and woman who stood on Ullanor's soil that day had been selected for their valour and conduct, and until the day they died each would have the singular honour of wearing the onyx-and-gold Triumph Bar upon their uniforms. The award was forged from bolt shells recovered from the field and melted down. Ranged around them,

the great war machines of the Collegia Titanica towered towards a sky cut to ribbons by the contrails of a thousand aerospace fighters; and above those, high over the thin white cirrus clouds of Ullanor's day, warships moved as slow as they dared through the upper atmosphere, washes of interface heat rolling off their void shields as they showed their flanks in a gesture of renewed fealty.

Then the legionaries. Of all the Emperor's genhanced brigades, a full fourteen of the Legions stood represented at Ullanor, and with them came nine beings of inimit-able power and majesty.

Nine gods and angels made flesh, the primarchs of the greatest armies ever created by human hands. Mortarion, the reaper of men and master of the Death Guard, cowled and lethal in aspect, matched by the warrior-guardians of his Deathshroud. The Phoenician, Fulgrim, resplendent in his finery and handsome in aspect, lit by the reflection of gold and platinum. Magnus the Red, the Crimson King, the lord of the unknown, his soul as much a mystery to the common world as the workings of the warp and the ghosts within it. Lorgar Aurelian, the quiet and brooding zealot who burned with such intensity and buried it all deep in his heart, saying little and standing watchful. His polar opposite was Angron, the gladiator-lord and son of grief, never able to settle or moderate his seething, endless fury, always on the verge of outburst and violence. Dorn, the stalwart man of stone, the Imperial Fist with his unswerving manner and unbreakable focus, the one who would always obey, always ready for duty. The Khan, his fur-trimmed robes and ornate armour detailed with a thousand narratives of the White Scars Legion, his every step across the land a challenge to the galaxy. Then Sanguinius of the Blood Angels, flanked by the gold-armoured honour detail of the Sanguinary Guard, his mighty wings folded back across his battle plate, his face turned to the sky to welcome the impossible, majestic sight before them.

Horus Lupercal, of course. Horus of the Luna Wolves, the Hero of Ullanor, liberator and first among equals. Horus, who was to be given the new honour of a title above and beyond any that had been bestowed before; a title, it could be said, that would forever carry the echo of his name.

There was no memory of the self beyond the command, the deed and the completion of the action. If memory had once existed, then it had been excised by deft application of scalpel blades and laser cutting beams. Slivers of brain matter sliced out or burned away to render down a self into nothing.

Or something more than nothing, perhaps, if one were generous. Was a tool a worthy thing? Was a lifetime locked into servility commendable? Perhaps, but only if such service was selfless. When shackled to it, made slave and helot in the name of service, then it was another matter entirely.

Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two's work tables for the day started and ended in this place, a commander's lavish tent erected on the southern face of the Great Triumph's stage. A light wind ripped the shallow peak of the pavilion overhead, but the servitor only registered the atmospheric effect in the most vague way. Perhaps if the weather changed it would be required to modify its operating parameters to reflect the circumstances, but so far there was no sign of such a thing. It did not possess the self-awareness to act upon data such as that; if a change was to be made, a fresh directive meme would be broadcast into the implant module that took up a full quarter of Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two's skull. The module's outer skin was made of brass polished to a brilliant amber lustre, and it matched the buttons on the servitor's brocaded coat, the buckles on its boots, the multiplicity of additional fingers at the end of its long arms.

The unit had been a gift from the commander of the Second Mounted Xiphos Regiment, his personal servile bequeathed to the Luna Wolves Legion after his invaliding from the field of battle on

Brocktorian; before then, it had come to the Xiphos from the Mechanicum, approximately forty-two years earlier. Before that, Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two had been Toin Sepsoe, a rapist and killer of women in the hives of Hollonan, but like the rest of his sordid and unpleasant pre-life, that had all been taken away and disposed of. Captured by the city guard, convicted and sentenced to perpetual servitude all that Sepsoe had been the adepts chemically smothered or surgically removed. Like the cancer that it was, his noxious personality was excised and what remained of his flesh repurposed for a greater good.

Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two cooked and cleaned, it performed laundry duties, it would fetch and carry, and if one did not look directly at it, one might think it was still a man. This was untrue, of course; beneath the military uniform it wore, the meat and skeleton that had once been Sepsoe was retrofitted with more durable ceramite brackets and numerous bio-organic implants that allowed it to live longer than a human being, to go without the need for sleep and to sustain nourishment through ingestion of a bulk nutrient porridge, similar to that fed to grox or riding beasts.

It had no understanding of the meaning of the place where it worked, it could not have differentiated between the barracks of the lowest ranked Imperial Army soldier or the halls of the Imperial Palace. All Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two had was the works tables implanted in its memory core, the temporary files that told it who was in charge and what level of service it was to provide to them.

One of the subjects on that table now entered the tents, moving with purpose and a manner that could have been read as annoyance. A giant to the servitor, clad in power armour that hummed with every heavy bootstep, incapable of merely *walking*, only striding.

A subroutine activated, causing Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two to bow low and utter a pre-programmed greeting. ‘M’lord Horus. I await your instructions.’ The words were wet and breathy.

Horus ignored the servitor and stepped to the far side of the tent, where a flexible panel in the weatherproof material allowed him to see out. Night was falling across Ullanor and still the Great Triumph was rolling on. Ships in the sky glittered like radiant jewels, and the fires muttered a steady chorus over which the sounds of a victorious army washed back and forth, like ocean surf. Out there, humans and post-humans alike were celebrating and sorrowful in equal order. They cheered on the Emperor and his newly-appointed commander of all the Imperium’s forces, but they were saddened by the announcement that the Master of Mankind would be leaving the Great Crusade to follow his works on Terra.

Horus shrugged off the wolf pelt about his shoulders, tossing the mantle to one side with scarcely a glance to where it fell. Dutifully, the servitor walked to the heaped fur and gathered it up.

After a pre-determined interval, Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two’s program pushed it to speak once again, a reminder interrupt. ‘What is your will, Warmaster?’

‘Warmaster,’ echoed Horus, rolling the word around his mouth, tasting it. His mood did not appear to lighten. He turned away. ‘Bring me wine.’

‘I exist to serve.’ The servitor ambled to a table and recovered a bulbous oenochoe jug covered with a mosaic of running wolves under gibbous moons. It poured a generous measure into a bronze cup and brought it to Horus’s open hand. The goblet, large in the servitor’s grip, was delicate in the Warmaster’s fingers.

Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two returned to a waiting mode, head slightly bowed, observing without really observing. It did not register the way Horus allowed a scowl to cross his powerful features before he chased it away with a sip from the cup.

Just then, the motion of the tent's door flap caused the servitor's head to snap up and focus on another arrival. A second priority personage entered, this one not as high upon the duty tables as Horus but still greatly elevated. Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two monitored the figure for a few seconds, tracking the shape of it. He was another giant like the Warmaster, but his mass was strangely displaced in white forms folded tight across his shoulders. Wings.

'Brother,' said Sanguinius, with a smile. 'Ah, forgive me. *Warmaster*.' He bowed slightly. 'The title does have such gravitas, don't you think?'

Horus managed a smile in return, but it was brittle and it did not reach his eyes. 'Shall I grow to fit it?'

The Angel seemed not to notice. 'It will grow to fit *you*. And you'll wear it well.'

The moment stretched into a pause before Horus spoke again. 'How do you manage that?'

'Manage what?'

'To find the right words at the right moment, every time. I see you when you speak to the others, to the rank and file. Even to those outside the Legion.'

Sanguinius spread his hands. 'We all have some of father's oratorial gift in us.'

'Aye,' he agreed. 'But when I seek words to express my intent I have to dig for them, measure them first and cut to size. You are effortless with it.'

'You're wrong,' said the Angel, summoning the servitor with a curl of his slender fingers. 'I'm just better at making it *look* effortless.'

Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two performed the function expected of it, bringing a new goblet and fresh wine to both the primarchs. Neither of them acknowledged it as it worked, then backed away once more.

'I saw the royal barge landing.' Horus nodded in the direction of the ship fields. 'The Custodian Guard are preparing for the journey.'

'The voyage back to Terra is a long one,' said the Blood Angels primarch. His tone was curiously neutral. 'The *Imperator Somnium* has shifted out to far orbit. The Emperor will lead the departure, it is only right. He will return to the Segmentum Solar and we… we will return to our Crusade.'

The signifier *Imperator Somnium* registered briefly in the servitor's memory core: an interstellar craft of unique classification, it was beyond the security clearance of the lowly machine-slave to even set foot aboard one of its shuttle-barges. A goliath among starships, the Emperor's command carrier matched in size the great orbital plates such as Riga and Skye, which floated over the surface of distant Terra like windborne island continents. When it had first entered orbit of Ullanor the planet's sun had been partially eclipsed, and the Emperor's helmsmen were forced to administer the ship's course with an iron hand, to prevent the mass of the vessel exerting a tidal effect on the local weather system.

'Our Crusade,' echoed the Warmaster. 'It truly is *ours* now, brother. Father's decision to return to the Imperial Palace places it squarely in our hands.'

They fell silent for a moment. 'You were as surprised as the rest of us,' said Sanguinius, at length. 'I had thought he would have told you of his intent.'

'To lead, one must have a solid grasp of theatre,' Horus replied distantly. 'And this is such a stage we have built here.' He trailed off, glancing back towards the window.

Sanguinius spoke again before Horus could say more. 'I think I have intruded. You wish a moment alone.' He turned back towards the door flap, placing his goblet on a table, the contents untouched.

‘I’ll keep the others occupied.’

‘What will you say?’ Horus asked the question to his back, and the Angel halted. ‘That you found me brooding?’

‘Are you?’ Sanguinius asked lightly. ‘We’re leaving that to Angron this night, I thought.’

‘He’s not happy.’

That gained Horus a nod. ‘He never is. It’s his lot in life.’ Sanguinius turned. ‘He’s furious. *More* furious than usual, I mean.’

Something shimmered, momentarily drawing the eye of the waiting servitor. The Warmaster was fingering the chain of platinum links hanging about his neck, upon them a sapphire cut into the shape of the Eye of Terra. The medallion was a sigil of rank and status, bestowed upon Horus only hours before at the dedication ceremony.

‘Angron won’t be the only one. There will be others who become embittered by the distinction father gave me this day. When Perturabo hears of it…’ He let the sentence trail off.

A shadow passed over his brother’s face. ‘It will not be to his liking, that is so. He will think it should have been him. And Curze, well…’ Sanguinius hesitated before he said the next words. ‘They’ll hate you for it. At least at first.’

Horus scowled and let the medallion drop from his fingers. ‘I never asked for this. But I won’t be sorry for it.’

‘Nor should you!’ Sanguinius went back to the goblet and took it up again. ‘Brother, the mantle of Warmaster is yours and it is right to be so.’ He grinned. ‘I am proud and pleased beyond my ability to express.’

‘You are,’ said Horus, as if it were a suddenly a certainty for him.

‘And Lorgar and Fulgrim?’ his brother continued. ‘Did you not hear them cheer with me when father said the words, when he named you supreme commander? The others were an echo behind, but they feel the same. I’m sure if Rogal were not so stiff he would have done so as well.’

‘Dorn did shake my hand.’

‘From the Imperial Fist, that’s practically an outburst of joy.’ Briefly, the Angel’s smile spread to his sibling and Horus gave a shallow nod. Sanguinius went on. ‘Do you know why he picked you? It wasn’t favouritism, it wasn’t politics or expedience. It’s not a reward, do you understand? It’s what you *deserve*. Because you have always been the best of us, Horus. You are the closest in soul to the people we are sworn to defend, you are your father’s son… and, let’s not overlook the fact that you are a *fairly good* general.’

The servitor watched the Angel walk to the Warmaster’s side and clap a hand upon the pauldron of his power armour. The easy camaraderie between them was a very human thing for two beings of such a starkly post-human nature. But still, there remained a reluctance in the master of the Luna Wolves that seemed at odds with his manner.

Horus eyed his brother. ‘Some will think it should have been you.’

Sanguinius blinked, the declaration momentarily taking him unawares. Then he shook his head. ‘No. Do you believe that?’

‘Does it matter?’

The Angel’s jaw stiffened. ‘Anyone who thinks I should stand where you do now, anyone who speaks those words does not see *either* of us clearly.’ Despite the fact that the conversation contained no commands for it, Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two’s attention remained drawn to the two primarchs, as

if even the mechanical parts of its mind were fascinated by their exchange. ‘No, not I. I am… Too far away.’ His wings drew in towards his back, the slight motion ringing the small ornaments of silver and pearl hanging from the pinions as they moved. ‘A Warmaster can only walk the field of battle, never soar above it.’ Then the smile and the laughter returned. ‘This honour could only be yours. Our brothers will all come around in the end. Let some of them grimace and secretly claim they are the better choice, and as they do, you will prove to them why they are not with words and deeds. You will validate father’s decision, Horus. You already have. Angron and the rest… They just need to see it. Just as you need me now to tell you what you already know.’

‘Perhaps so,’ Horus admitted. ‘You have always been my conscience, Sanguinius. Never forget how much I value that.’

The Angel came to stiff attention, with a snap of ceramite so gunshot-loud that it made the servitor twitch and stutter. He saluted with the goblet. ‘You will lead us to a final, glorious victory in father’s stead, to the ends of the Great Crusade. I believe this with every fibre of my being.’ Sanguinius drained the goblet with ritual formality. ‘And I will do all I can to help you with this, however long it takes.’

With a nod, the Angel tossed the cup into the air and the servitor smoothly stepped forwards, its eight-fingered hand splaying open to catch the thrown goblet without effort. Unit Eight-Eight-Kappa-Two returned the drinking vessel to a serving trolley, cleaning it as it went.

Sanguinius began to walk away. ‘I’ll leave you to your thoughts, brother. And make the most of this moment of quiet, because I doubt you’ll have many more with your new office.’

‘Wait,’ Horus called out. ‘I have a question for you, that only now comes to me.’

‘I’ll answer if I can.’

The Warmaster did not turn to look at his brother as he spoke. ‘I’ve never asked you about your *gifts*, Sanguinius.’ The servitor sensed the other primarch stiffen at the words. ‘I have never asked about your sense for… future events.’

‘Nothing so grand,’ the other primarch demurred. ‘An inkling, no more. A greater sense of instinct that sometimes reveals itself to me in dreams.’

‘Indeed,’ Horus replied. ‘So tell me, in your dreams, did you ever see this day unfolding? Our father, taking leave of the Crusade for reasons he does not fully share with his sons, and this new laurel about my head?’ At last he turned to look his brother in the eyes. ‘Did you foresee any of this?’

The warmth faded from Sanguinius’s face. ‘No.’

Horus nodded once more.

‘Neither did I.’

PART II

CATHEDRAL OF THE MARK

SEVEN

I Call Conclave
Faces in the Fire
Running Cold

The lithocast chamber was filled with warriors as Captain Raldoron entered, each standing atop a shallow plinth under a cone of faint light. Every pedestal was occupied, and not one presented a man below the rank of company captain. There were close to three hundred of them, representing almost the full complement of the IX Legion. The colours of their armour were stark and blood-bright against the intentionally muted shades of the chamber's sand-coloured walls and floor.

A marker rune, displayed on the inside of his helmet, illuminated Raldoron's place as his gaze fell upon a vacant podium. He offered nods to the other men he passed. Nakir and Galan were in the row behind; there was Carminus of the Third Company, the fingers of his augmetic arm drumming absently on the stock of his holstered bolter; Berus, the High Warden, red robes covering his black battledress; the honoured armourer Metriculus, forever glaring through those machine-forged eyes of his.

The First Captain noted other splashes of colour out of place amidst the sea of red. The Space Wolf observer sent by Malcador was here as well, and standing next to the warrior in grey was another in slate-black armour, the stark white of his hair and beard framing his scarred face. The Word Bearers Acolyte Kreed did not meet his gaze.

Raldoron stepped up to his plinth and, with great formality, removed his helm and fastened it to his belt.

Against one wall of the lithocast chamber, ranged like a low ziggurat, were three more podia, the tallest carved from red granite to mimic the wind-smoothed shape of a natural stone outcropping. The room fell silent as Sanguinius emerged through an oval hatch and stepped up to the high vantage. At his sides were Azkaellon and Zuriel, and they followed him, dropping to one knee. The assembled Blood Angels did the same, and from the corner of his eye Raldoron saw Kreed and Redknife give identical, studied bows.

'Rise,' said the primarch. His usual smile was notably absent. 'I call conclave.'

'We heed the call.' Raldoron's voice was just one of those raised loud enough to echo off the walls.

'The fleet proceeds at full alert,' Sanguinius went on, the Angel's words strong and resonant in the stillness of the chamber. 'Our course and objectives remain unchanged. But after what we saw at Phorus…' His noble aspect stiffened. 'I bring us together so that we may speak as one. You are my sons, my swords. There are questions and we shall answer them together. Speak freely.'

'My lord.'

Raldoron suppressed a brief tic of amusement at the first warrior to break the silence. He could have gambled a primarch's ransom in gold against the certainty that the captain of the Fifth Company would give voice before all others. Amit stood, his arms folded over his chest, his dark eyes flashing.

‘What would you say that we have seen?’

‘Phorus was a warning, captain,’ said the primarch, accepting the directness of Amit’s challenge without comment. ‘A grand gesture by the enemy, doubtless conceived to strike fear into the hearts of those coming to oppose them.’

Amit caught Raldoron’s eye and spared him a look; then suddenly he seemed to lose definition and become jagged, like a low-gain sensor return. Ripples of colour crossed through him before he became stable once again. Like many of the Blood Angels in the lithocast chamber, Captain Amit was not physically present. At this moment, he stood in a transmission vestibule on board the battle-barge *Victus*, on the far side of the fleet. Hololithic arrays embedded in all the plinths allowed representations of each company commander to be part of the gathering, without them needing to travel from their own ships. The power requirement and cogitator processing capacity to operate the multiple real-time holograph communications streams was high, and the system was rarely used on this scale. Beyond the range of a few light days, the delay in the message transfer became problematic and unwieldy, but with the massed fleet in close proximity the chamber was performing its function perfectly.

‘Master, one world aflame does not concern me.’ Amit gestured at the air. ‘But a shadow over every sun…’ He let the sentence hang.

‘This… *veil*…’ began Captain Nakir. The fanciful name for the shadow-effect had been coined by one of Admiral DuCade’s men, and a day later it had spread throughout the entire fleet. ‘What manner of weapon is it? What can kill the starlight?’

‘The stars cannot be dead.’ Helik Redknife spoke without waiting to be acknowledged, mild derision in his voice. ‘I would know it.’

Nakir’s lip curled. ‘But something has been done, and on a scale that dwarfs anything I have ever encountered.’

‘The universe is a gathering of the unknown,’ offered Redknife cryptically. ‘That has always been true.’

‘Perhaps, Wolf Captain.’ Sanguinius glanced at the other warrior. ‘But it is my father’s wish that we know it all the same.’ He nodded to Zuriel. ‘Tell them.’

The Sanguinary Guard produced a data-slate and read aloud from it. ‘This is from the fleet log. Picket ships among the sternguard wings report that an opaque mass resembling a black cloud has formed, six-point-three light days beyond the designated outer marker of the Signus Cluster. Long-range optical observations in all directions appear to support the conclusion that this mass has completely shrouded the system.’

‘Is it some form of displacement?’ said Galan. ‘There are stories of worlds falling wholesale into the immaterium after catastrophic warp space events. Could that happen to an entire star system, and to us along with it?’

Nearby, Metriculus stroked his chin, dismissing the question. ‘The energy to achieve such a result would likely be greater than the sum total output of the galaxy itself. It is irrational to conceive it.’

‘Are these rational times?’ Redknife’s reply was almost a whisper.

The primarch shook his head slowly. ‘We remain in normal space, Captain Galan. Our Navigators confirm this to us, although they report that they have lost all contact with warp beacons beyond the line of the veil.’

‘Chronometrics have been affected,’ Zuriel reported, ‘and so too have our communications. Vox-

signals directed into the cloud mass are reflected back. The astropaths...' He hesitated, shooting the Angel a look before continuing. 'An astropath aboard the *Ignis* attempted to make a sending through the barrier. He claimed he was assailed by screaming, maddened echoes of his own telepathic voice.'

Azkaellon spoke for the first time. 'He took his own life shortly afterwards.'

Raldoron suddenly felt compelled to ask the question. 'How?'

'He broke his own neck,' said the Guard Commander, ending it there.

Sanguinius brought his hands together before him. 'I have ordered a single ship to disengage from the fleet, the cruiser *Helios*. They are following a reverse course back along our path of approach to the Signus Cluster. Their orders are to conduct a close examination of this phenomenon.'

He did not give voice to it, but Raldoron saw the concern in his primarch's eyes, and found it reflected in those of every one of his brothers.

'The nephilim have nothing but tricks,' grated High Warden Berus, glancing around and gaining nods of agreement from many of his brothers. Berus's image crackled with a spit of static. 'On Melchior we saw what they are capable of. I believe what we encounter here are more of their mind-games and shadow-play.' He smiled without humour, showing a feral, unlovely grin. 'This is what they do, brothers. They assault us under the pretence of supernatural powers and sorcery! It is warfare that only succeeds against the weak and the credulous.'

'I watched Phorus burn. We all did,' Amit shot back. 'That was no illusion.'

Raldoron agreed with his comrade. 'The corpses and the wrecks. The ruined planet and the barrier. We cannot deny this truth, my brothers. Nothing we have seen since entering the Signus Cluster is akin to any weapon known to be used by the nephilim.'

'Or any other foe, for that matter,' added Galan.

'If I may offer an opinion?' All heads turned towards the Word Bearer, whose image shimmered and jumped as it filtered in from the bridge of the *Dark Page*. The primarch gave Kreed a nod and he went on. 'Captain Raldoron is correct, and so is the esteemed Warden. But what you fail to consider is the mindset of these monsters. Our Legion did not have the privilege of drawing blood on these aliens as yours did, but what I have been told of them paints the picture of a tenacious enemy. And if, as we believe, the Khan did indeed obliterate their home planet, then maybe these are the last of their species in the universe.' He spread his hands. 'How can we know what tactics they will employ when their survival is at stake?'

Amit's face twisted and he pointed a finger, his holograph stuttering. 'You brought this mission to us, messenger. Do you know more than you have revealed?'

For a microsecond, Raldoron saw a flicker of uncertainty in Kreed's eyes; then it was gone and he was shaking his head. 'I can offer only my impressions as an outsider. More than that… *I can't say*.'

'The truth of this will out.' Sanguinius's words silenced any further conversation. 'While the *Helios* undertakes its mission, I have also ordered the *Hermia* to take on a force of legionaries and travel ahead to Signus VI, the planet known as Holst.'

'The hive-world?' said Redknife. 'Is that wise?'

'A single ship rather than the fleet,' Azkaellon broke in. 'The *Hermia* is stealth-capable. It will be able to close to landing range with a much lower chance of detection.'

'Holst is as silent as every other world in this system,' continued the primarch, 'but if it is intact, we may be able to learn more about the invasion. There may even be survivors.'

Kreed inclined his head. 'I have dispatched Captain Harox and two of my best trackers to assist in

the operation. If someone still lives on Holst, they'll find them.'

Redknife raised an eyebrow. 'Trackers?' he repeated doubtfully.

The Acolyte sniffed at the implied barb. 'It is not only wolves that know how to hunt, captain.'

The Angel scanned their faces. 'In the interim, return to your companies and prepare for war.' His aspect became grim. 'The battle that lies ahead of us will be unlike any we have faced. I know it in my blood. We will be tested, my sons.'

Raldoron raised his mailed fist and led the return, as was the First Captain's duty. 'For Baal and Terra,' he called, his voice resonant. 'For Sanguinius and the Emperor!'

'*Sanguinius and the Emperor*!' The shout echoed throughout the fleet.

The Stormbird rumbled out of the aft launch bay and powered into a diving turn across the inert thruster nozzles of the *Hermia*. The drop-ship threaded around the Blood Angels cruiser and past the slick of wreckage the larger vessel was using as cover. Once, orbital transfer docks had studded the bright ice rings of Holst like gemstones strung along a necklace, but now they were no more than collections of metal fragments. Junkyard remains had spilled into the planetary halo, disrupting the sparkling planes of dust and the shepherd moons. It was ideal camouflage for the cruiser and the drop-ship, enabling the former to come close and the latter to sprint the rest of the distance to atmospheric interface. Regular falls of debris rained down on the ice world, and the Stormbird moved within a swathe of such wreckage. If enemy units were watching the skies, they would not be able to pick out the drop-ship from the burning remains.

That was the theory, of course. The reality was, if the helm-servitors flying Stormbird Delta-25 *Blood's Eagle* were not as good as promised, everyone aboard would perish in a fiery collision long before making planetfall.

Meros dismissed the thought as he rose from his cage-seat, and moved to secure his weapon and auxiliary battle gear in preparation for landing. One way or another, they would soon be on Holst's frigid surface.

He passed Sarga, who gave him a nod. 'Ready for this?'

'Always,' said the other Blood Angel, his attention straying.

Meros looked and saw Sarga was watching Captain Harox and the two other Word Bearers sitting up at the aft of the Stormbird. The three warriors in their granite-grey armour were already fully sealed in their suits – in fact, Meros noted that they had arrived from the *Dark Page* with their helmets in place and kept them on all through the pre-launch briefing and take-off. Harox and his men were leaning forwards, each of them engrossed in the pages of a small book that was connected to a pouch on their belts by an adamantine chain. The chains each bore a single silver medallion, although Meros could not make out the design stamped upon it. 'What do you think they are reading?'

Sarga shrugged. 'Battle doctrine, maybe? You know, I asked one of them if I could see and he showed me a page. Didn't understand a word of it. All written in some old cuneiform system.'

'Probably a Colchisian text,' Meros suggested, moving down the compartment. 'Perhaps when we return you can ask Kreed to read it to you.'

At the arming rack, he took up his bolt pistol and worked the slide before slamming it deep into his hip holster. Behind him, he heard the hatch to the rear compartment open and close, and presently felt a hand on his shoulder.

He looked up into a dark, serious face. 'Kano?'

His battle-brother nodded. ‘I decided I’d join you.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Apothecary, glancing around the compartment where the other Blood Angels were seated. ‘I thought you had to remain aboard the flagship with Raldoron.’

‘The First Captain can do without me for a while.’ Kano gave a brief smile, but it seemed forced. ‘I called in a favour. I needed…’ He hesitated, correcting himself. ‘I wanted to take a look down there.’ The legionary jerked his head in the direction of the planet.

‘I thought I was the reckless one, forever in harm’s way. You’re supposed to be sensible, all bookish and thoughtful…’ Meros saw that Kano already had a boltgun slung over his shoulder. ‘I won’t say I’m unhappy to have you stand with me, brother. It’s just unexpected.’

That hesitation was visible again, and this time Kano didn’t try to hide it. He knew his old friend too well. ‘Everything about this mission has been unexpected.’

‘Aye, no dispute.’ Meros gave a nod, eyeing his comrade. ‘Now, why don’t you tell me what really occupies your thoughts? Not that iron-skull Annellus, surely?’

‘The Warden? No.’ Kano frowned. ‘He thinks me a target to keep in sight, that’s certain. But I’ve decided to stay as clear of him as I can.’ He leaned in, speaking in low tones. ‘You’ve heard about the deaths, yes?’

‘An astropath, on the *Ignis*.’

Kano nodded. ‘And the rest.’

That brought Meros up short. ‘There were others? Other astropaths?’

‘No, not yet at any rate. I thought you might have heard something from the medicae staff on the *Red Tear*.’ He paused. ‘Suicides, Meros. Not one of the Legion, but a handful of crewmen, Legion-serfs. All of them took their own lives after the… the *sign* on Phorus.’

The Apothecary considered this. It was a harsh truth that some unaugmented humans simply could not withstand the mental pressures of extended space travel and combat operations. Deaths, sometimes self-inflicted, others from uncontrolled emotional outbursts, were regrettably a fact of life among naval crews. He repeated this to Kano.

‘Not all at the same time. On eight different ships, at the exact same instant.’

‘A coincidence.’

Kano shook his head. ‘I don’t believe in them.’ He placed his hand on Meros’s shoulder once again. ‘You trust me, brother. Let me hear you say the words.’

Meros broke into a confused grin. ‘Of course I do, you fool. I owe you my life. That debt earns you my countenance until the grave.’

The other warrior guided him further down the Stormbird’s central aisle, where the roar of the engines was loud enough to cover their conversation from the earshot of others. ‘I must tell someone,’ Kano said, his gaze momentarily turning inwards. ‘Meros, I *saw* something.’

The Apothecary said nothing, his expression neutral as Kano told him of the vivid dream that had come to him in the meditation cell, the endless fall and the bloody, crimson-stained angel.

Meros had seen many sides of Brother Kano in the years that they had been comrades-in-arms; he had seen him elated in the moment of victory, at his lowest ebb during a long night of battle when death had seemed certain. Furious and enraged, happy and laughing. But never this. Never *uncertain*.

He took a moment to assimilate the former Librarian’s words, knowing full well what they might mean. Meros didn’t insult Kano by suggesting that it might have been no more than a dream; his friend was trained in the arts of the mind, and he of all men would know the difference. ‘If the Wardens hear

of this, you'll be taken off the line, censured.'

'At the very least,' said Kano bitterly. 'If not for the insistence of the primarch himself, every Blood Angel who shares my skill might have suffered the same fate as the psykers of the Imperial Fists, isolated and locked away from our brothers. If the Wardens had their way, we would have been exiled back to Baal.'

Meros folded his arms. 'What do you intend to do?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

The steady vibration of the Stormbird's thrusters shifted in pitch, and the deck trembled beneath their boots. 'We're entering Holst's atmosphere,' said Meros.

Kano nodded, turning away. 'Thank you for your counsel, brother. Keep this between us for now, yes?'

'On my oath,' agreed Meros, even as he realised how much the other man's words had troubled him.

Delta-25 Blood's Eagle shrieked through the outer regions of the hive-world's sky, trailing hot plasmatic gas and torn air. A shower of metal fragments from the shoals of orbital wreckage burned up around it, becoming brief flashes of immolation before atomising under the incredible temperatures at the interface zone.

Baniol was the chief flight officer, strapped into the flight couch at the rear of the narrow cockpit, resisting the g-forces of the descent with all the strength he could muster. Like Tolens, the engineer in the seat behind him, Baniol was a Legion-serf. That meant he was a human auxiliary in the employ of the fleet, an ordinary man in comparison to the organic war machines carried in the Stormbird's troop bays. Once, Baniol had dreamed about becoming one of them, a Space Marine; but that dream had faded away a long time ago, dying in the cold light of reality. He had been deemed too weak. Too human.

And recently, Baniol's dreams had become a place he no longer wanted to visit. The pilot had been able to conceal the effect of stimms he used to stay awake, at least at first. But now he was afraid the others could see it. Baniol was afraid that the legionaries could *smell* it on him.

He was afraid a lot of the time, in fact. Especially since the dreams had started to bleed into his waking life.

Baniol made the mistake of looking out of the thick cockpit window beyond the helm and into the turmoil of the crackling plasma fires flashing over the Stormbird's prow and canards. He saw *things* looking out at him from within the fiery discharges, things that knew his name and wanted to bite into him.

'Hey!' Tolens shouted at Baniol, in a way that made it clear he'd been doing it for a while. 'Watch the separation! Are you listening to me? We're drifting off the glide path.' When the officer didn't react, Tolens swore loudly and disengaged his straps, turning in his seat. 'Baniol, are you asleep back there?'

Something snapped in Baniol and he spun away from the controls, glaring at the engineer with such pale, sweating intensity that Tolens actually recoiled in shock. 'You see them, don't you? The faces? The faces in the fire!' He jabbed his fingers at the windows. 'Look! *Look*!'

Tolens turned slightly, confused. 'What are you talking about–'

'You can see them!' Baniol didn't know where the sudden, explosive burst of violence came from,

but abruptly he was out of his restraints, grabbing Tolens by the scruff of his neck. Catching the other man off-balance, Baniol rammed his face into the canopy beside the first helm-servitor. 'Look!' he shouted. 'You see them!'

Bone cracked, and blood spurted. The engineer went slack and collapsed across a console, eyes rolling back in his head.

The flight officer whimpered and smacked at his head, panic flaring inside him. That was not what was meant to happen. He blinked through tears, watching the icy surface of Holst coming closer. Man-made structures – huge arcology towers and great earthworks cut into the permafrost – were visible through the constant snowstorm.

He had made a terrible mistake, and now it had matured into murder. He couldn't let the legionaries know what he had done. He couldn't go back. Not now. Not ever. He had to make sure no one found out.

Outside, the fires were screaming and giggling, watching as Baniol robotically drew his sidearm and aimed it at the back of the servitor's head.

The sound was distinct and clear. It could not have been anything other than the discharge from a narrow-bore laspistol. The muffled *snap-crack* of the shot turned Meros's head.

'I heard it too,' began Sarga, looking up at him from his acceleration rack. He had more to say, but Meros didn't hear it. Suddenly, the Stormbird's nose fell and the drop-ship entered a death-dive, tumbling off course. Before he could stop himself, Meros was pitched away from the deck and down the length of the compartment, thrown into disarray like every other loose item on the ship.

He shielded his head as he cannoned down the aisle and finally crashed to a halt against a heap of cargo pods at the aft of the bay. Meros struggled back to his feet, realising that his fall had been broken by one of the Word Bearers. Their commander, Harox, was already recovering, reaching for the hatchway that led to the flight deck.

More crackles of las-fire sounded over their heads, sporadic and random.

'Captain…' Meros began. 'Wait.'

Harox ignored him and hauled himself up, fighting the g-forces with each step. The Word Bearer stabbed at the hatch control and the oval panel snapped back. Meros scowled and grabbed on to the handrail, following Harox through.

The broad form of the captain's head and shoulders were barely into the cockpit when las-bolts found their way to him. The flight officer shot wildly, pulses of yellow coherent light fizzing into Harox's pauldrons, his torso plate and helmet. The laspistol wasn't a battlefield-rated weapon, more a personal defence sidearm, and only a lucky hit to the eye lenses of the warrior's helmet would have proven dangerous to him. The discharges from the gun cut burning divots in the thick outer layers of his ceramite armour but did not penetrate.

Harox lurched forwards, the dark bulk of him filling the flight deck. Meros came through after him in time to see the Word Bearer slap the gun from the serf's hand with a *snap* of breaking bones. The blow carried enough force to bounce the man off the inside of the canopy and back into Harox's waiting grip.

'What is this?' From behind his scowling breath grille, the Word Bearer's voice was sonorous and fearsome.

Meros processed the scene in a fraction of a second, the quickened accuitive processes of his

transhuman mind picking out the dead flight engineer on the deck, the blasted servitors, the skirling alerts from the Stormbird's warning systems. He saw that the auto-flight cogitator was a wreck, as were the thrust regulators and the long-range vox-unit.

'It's… *suicide*,' he said. The word lay in his chest like the aftermath of a body-blow.

'The faces, the faces!' The serf's eyes bulged and the muscles of his neck were corded like steel cables as he flailed at Harox's helmet, scratching at the jade-coloured lenses. He tried in vain to unseat the captain's headgear, desperately pulling at the neck-ring clasps. 'I can see the faces, you have to see them too, the faces and the fire and the blood! The face, the face of the–'

The man's words ended in a wet crunch as Harox crushed his trachea and tossed the body away. The Word Bearer took a step forwards, peering out through the canopy at the fast-approaching ground. The sharp peaks of spindly ice mountains flashed past off the tips of the Stormbird's wings. 'Blood Angel,' he said, without looking at Meros. 'Can you fly this craft?'

Meros pushed past him towards the auxiliary flight controls. 'A question you should have considered before you killed that serf out of hand.' Grimly, he settled into the chair and gripped the controls. They were small in his armoured hands, like something made for a child in the grip of an adult. 'I suppose we'll find out. Tell the others to strap in. We won't have the opportunity for a second attempt.'

Every one of the Legiones Astartes provided their warriors with a hypnogogic training programme that gave them a basic understanding of vehicle operations. Legionaries were imprinted with the knowledge of how to run groundcraft and common aerial units such as skimmers, gunship speeders and jetbikes – but piloting a Stormbird was at the limit of this teaching.

Meros allowed himself to forget for a moment that he was an Apothecary, surrendering his reflexes to the ingrained muscle-memory programmes deep in his mind. He remembered how to the fly the Stormbird in a distant way, with all the clarity of a man singing back a half-heard melody.

There was no time to conduct this cleanly or carefully. The Stormbird's port wing clipped the apex of a blue-white ice pillar, blasting a sheet of snow and frost out around it, pulling the drop-ship off its heading. Holst-Prime Hive stretched out below the craft in a vast rockcrete sprawl, a dozen narrow triangular towers arranged around a single giant cone, cross-connected by hundreds of aerial viaducts and monorail lines at every level. The hive towers emerged from a low, flat geodesic dome that in turn lay over the junction of several multi-lane highways. There was nothing that looked like a landing pad visible at this altitude, and with all the damage to the controls it was highly unlikely that the Stormbird's standard vertical touchdown mode would be operable.

As the craft slid through the frozen air, crabbing into the hard crosswinds off the towers, Meros extended the landing skids from the underside of the fuselage.

Under normal circumstances, the highways and the complexes of Holst were protected from the murderous weather conditions of the frigid planet by force walls. The invisible barriers would deflect the snows and cut the teeth of the winds, but it was clear by the almost uniform patina of grey-white over the roads that the system had been inactive for many days. Bulges beneath the metre-thick snowfall concealed the hulks of stalled cargo trucks from the ice mines, abandoned to freeze in where they sat.

Meros shouted a warning over the general vox-channel and activated the retro-thrusters, but the damage to the cockpit was too severe.

Stormbird Delta-25 *Blood's Eagle* dropped out of the hazy sky towards the highway, its crimson hull still sizzling with the displaced heat of orbital re-entry. It landed badly, ploughing into a snow bank and the obstacles hidden beneath, throwing up plumes of ice. Metal sheared and broke away; the port wing crumpled and the hull twisted onto its side. The drop-ship splayed into an uncontrolled skid that carried it down the frost-rimed road for another kilometre before velocity finally bled away to nothing.

The ship's hull groaned and ticked as plumes of steam puffed into the air, immediately freezing back into a fresh fall of metallic sleet.

Shipmaster Godolfan leaned forwards in his command chair and peered across the bridge, glaring at the sight off the bow of the *Helios* as if he could intimidate it into giving him answers. He rubbed his clean-shaven chin. 'This is damned peculiar,' he said, his Enigman accent turning the statement into a studied drawl.

As the cruiser closed the distance towards the dark barrier surrounding the Signus Cluster, the mood on Godolfan's bridge had become muted. Slowly, his people fell silent and the usual sense of professional focus had given way to something else. It wasn't fear; he refused to call it that. *Awe*, perhaps.

It was hard not to look out into that fathomless wall of black smoke and not feel something had gone deeply awry in the universe. Godolfan's six decades of service with the Imperial armed forces had shown him many things and taken him to many places, but the sheer *wrongness* of the strange shroud affected him in a way he found hard to articulate.

By right, it should not have been so disturbing; it was just darkness. Nothing but some strange stellar phenomenon, a great cosmic blind called into being by the enemies of humanity. Troubling, indeed, even formidable. But nothing to hobble a man's will.

'Distance to the inner edge?' The question came from Captain Reznor, a lieutenant-commander from the 164th Company. The hulking legionary stood close to the gunnery alcove, his hawkish face framed by long black hair. Reznor was part of a force of fifty Blood Angels on board the *Helios*, in line with the primarch's orders to investigate and report back on what the crew-serfs were calling the *veil*.

When the reply didn't come at once, Godolfan glared at his sounding officer. 'Answer him, Lieutenant Dequen!'

The young woman worked her console with a building sense of agitation. 'I would if I could, sir…'

Godolfan's face twisted in a grimace and he rose from his chair, stalking across the room. The shipmaster had been born on Enigma's orbital plexes, and he had the spindly, long-legged gait typical of his low-grav upbringing. 'Explain it to me,' he demanded, craning over Dequen to stare into the depths of the holograph showing her sensor reads.

'Sir, I can't give a sounding because the auspex grids refuse to settle.' She pointed at a pane of gibberish data on the display. 'One moment I have a null, almost as if the sensors have been disconnected. Then the scans appear to be reflecting back to us, phase-shifted out of synchrony. At other times, I detect energetic constructs that match nothing on record…' She frowned. 'Just now I got a return showing organic matter out there.'

'Organic?' echoed Godolfan with incredulity.

'Aye, sir,' said Dequen.

The shipmaster turned away. 'We must be close, Captain Reznor. These effects may be an artefact

of the barrier's creation.' He glanced back at the main viewport.

The dark vapours billowed through the vacuum, and the motion and shape of them was like no nebulae or dust cloud. The veil moved in a way that could convince a man it had intent, coils of it seeming to reach out hesitantly towards the *Helios* like the fingers of a curious child, furtively shrinking away before making contact.

'Best guess,' Dequen offered. 'Ten kilometres and closing.'

'Helm,' ordered the shipmaster, 'hold station here.' The officer at the navigation console replied in the affirmative, but the motions of the cloud did not recede. 'I said hold!' Godolfan snapped.

'The phenomenon is in motion, not the ship,' said Reznor.

Godolfan glared at the black mass, his annoyance rising. He was a man of rationality and cold certainties, and he disliked anything that defied his attempts to classify it.

Shapes were moving out there, behind the outermost layers of the veil. Ghostly forms that were too regular to be swirls of cosmic dust or radiative energy. The shipmaster's gaze picked out eyes and mouths, the silhouettes of great faces brimming with tusks and fangs, black upon black, all of them grinning back at him.

They assembled beneath the Stormbird's intact starboard wing. With the drop-ship on its side, the massive aerofoil curved up over the heads of the legionaries, shielding them from the ceaseless snowfall. Fluid dripped from cracks in the fuselage, unspent fuel spilling out of punctured tanks to pool on the highway. The puddles were already turning to ice around their edges, Holst's incredible cold powerful enough to freeze the liquid promethium.

Kano found Meros attending to one of the tactical squad. The Apothecary's unexpected turn at the drop-ship's controls had brought them all down safely – although *safely* was a relative term. None of the Blood Angels or Harox's Word Bearers had perished in the crash landing, but there had been a few minor injuries. Sergeant Cassiel was currently taking stock of their condition; for all intents and purposes they were fully operational and their deployment had commenced.

Kano almost smiled at Cassiel's stoic, direct reading of the situation. The Stormbird would never fly again, but that would only be a problem if they needed it to.

'We're here, we are ready to proceed with the mission,' Cassiel was saying. 'Meros, can Brother Xagan fight?' His helm nodded towards the injured warrior.

Before Meros even had the chance to answer, Xagan pushed the Apothecary out of his way and stepped forwards. 'It's no concern of mine if someone wanted to fly the Stormbird like a drop-pod, brother-sergeant. On your orders, sir.'

'That's a yes,' Meros added wearily.

'I don't consider it wise to move off from the crash site.' Captain Harox and his two men were unharmed, and they had flatly refused any offer Meros made to examine them for injuries. 'The actions of your serf, the man Baniol… We cannot simply ignore them.'

'He lost his mind,' Cassiel replied. 'He stranded us here. Might have killed us into the bargain. It's troubling, but forgive me, captain, I fail to see how that incident prevents us from setting out on the mission my primarch gave us.'

'We have no ship, sergeant! No vox with which to reach the *Hermia*!'

Cassiel accepted this with a nod. 'Aye, both true. And when we do not make our first scheduled report, they will know something is amiss.' He kept his gaze on Harox, but his next question was

directed to Kano. ‘Brother, how long after we go vox-silent will a condition for concern be declared?’

‘Ten hours standard.’ Kano glanced up. ‘Just around local nightfall.’

One of the other Blood Angels shot a look into the dark sky. ‘This is daytime?’

‘Try to keep up, Leyteo,’ said the sergeant. He went on. ‘Ten hours, sir. More than enough time for us to explore the outer wards of Holst-Prime Hive.’ Cassiel paused, and at last the question that they all expected came to the fore. ‘Unless, of course, you wish to exercise your rank and relieve me of operational command of this mission. Then you can do whatever you want. *Sir*.’

Harox said nothing from behind the mask of his helm, and Kano wondered if he was speaking privately to his comrades. Then his gruff tones returned to the general comm-channel. ‘Captain Furio’s orders were quite clear, Sergeant Cassiel. This sortie is under your command. My men and I will follow your lead.’

Cassiel nodded. ‘Here’s how we will run this, then – staggered skirmish line, fifteen-metre separation. Vox check every ten minutes.’ He turned to point down the highway. ‘According to the maps on the signum, this road leads into the main atrium of the upper city, so all we need to do is follow it. Set all thermodynamic and infra-red sensing to maximum acuity. If there is anything even remotely alive on this ball of ice, we will either kill it or rescue it. Clear?’

The legionaries nodded in silent assent.

‘Then move out. Xagan, as you are so eager to prove yourself, take the lead with one of Captain Harox’s trackers.’

Kano unlimbered his bolter and took his place in the formation, pausing to throw a look back at the fallen Stormbird. A layer of snow was already settling over it.

‘Give it a couple of hours, and it will be buried,’ said Meros from nearby. He looked back along the line in the ice that marked their landing.

‘My thanks for not killing us,’ Kano returned, trying to shrug it off. ‘Does that make us even now?’

Meros saw through the lightness in his tone. ‘Baniol was trying to kill himself. Like the others. He was screaming, raving. What he said made no sense.’ The Apothecary relayed what he could remember of the dead pilot’s words. ‘Is that what happened to the others, to the astropath?’

Kano shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’ A creeping sense of cold played over his skin – a physical impossibility, given the airtight seal of his power armour and the controlled climate maintained by its life-support systems. ‘But these things are connected. There’s no other explanation.’

They found the first bodies in the atrium where the highway entered the metropolis, at the edge of a multi-level annex that comprised a vendor arcade, an open-air dining court and a monorail station. The corpses were drifted ten deep in some places, almost all of them oriented in the same way: with the city proper to their backs and the highway before them.

Meros saw heaps of dead Signusi citizens lying next to stalled rail cars or crushed against airlock doors that had not opened.

‘They were left where they fell,’ said Sarga, as they picked their way through the silent aftermath. ‘And they died running.’

The bodies were all pallid with the cold, blinded eyes staring into nothing, blackened lips open in silent screams. Their flesh was strangely bloated and frozen solid, and thin rimes of hoarfrost covered them.

In places where the dome had partly collapsed, snowdrifts had entered the arcology, but for the most part the lethal cold had been conjured out of the atmosphere. There were signs of structural damage here and there, but the majority of the buildings were intact. Holst-Prime Hive was a glacial tomb, and with each step the Blood Angels took, their ceramite boots crunched through the new layer of frost. Against the dirty white hue of the snow, the armour of the legionaries stood out in stark, garish contrast. Only the Word Bearers seemed to blend in, as dark as the long shadows cast by the hab-towers.

As per orders, a Techmarine from the Ninth Company by the name of Kaide was documenting everything they saw. He controlled a servo-skull making slow circles over the heads of the warriors, buzzing quietly each time it took a pict-capture of the area. Kaide followed behind Sergeant Cassiel as he approached the Apothecary.

'Meros. You have a theory about this?' Cassiel gestured at the mounds of the dead.

He sighed behind his breath mask. 'For the sake of these poor fools, it seems it was quick. Death struck them all within seconds of one another.' Meros paused over the body of a male in sequined robes, of the kind favoured by outworld mercantile clans. Judging by the cut of his clothes and his high quality augmetic implants, this man had been wealthy; not that the depths of his coffers had done him much good here.

'No immediate signs of outward injury. My first guess is some kind of telepsychic offensive, perhaps a fast-acting gaseous or viral agent.'

'A neuronic weapon?' suggested Kaide. 'A mind-shredder has similar effects.'

'I've never known of one that could project over so wide an area,' said Meros. 'But that's not to say it is impossible.'

'So.' Cassiel folded his arms over his chest. 'They didn't die like the ones on the ships, then?'

Meros slowly drew his fractal-bladed combat knife from its sheath on his boot. 'Let's find out.' He pointed at the greyed skin of the dead merchant's swollen arm. 'Sarga? If you would.'

The other Blood Angel held the stiff limb firmly, and Meros struck with the knife in a single, smooth action. The meat of the frozen body came away with a peculiar squeaking sound. The cut was ragged, but clean through. Dispassionately, the Apothecary turned the sample over in his gloved hands, peering at the stump. He saw exploded veins and corrupted arteries, all destroyed by some unknown force, all flash-frozen by the brutal cold of Holst's atmosphere. But no bone in there.

Meros held the severed arm out to Cassiel. 'The same,' he said grimly. 'The environment here preserved the corpses differently, but they died in the same fashion.'

'There must be thousands of bodies in this area alone.' Kaide's head was bowed, but his vision was coming to him through the optical scopes of the mechanical drone circling high above. 'And an entire hive-city beyond that.'

'Other settlements, too,' added Sarga. 'This is the second most populous colony in the cluster.'

'Are we to assume that all the people of Holst are lost?' asked Kaide.

'You have the eyes in the sky, brother,' Cassiel was grim. 'Do you see anything that tells you different?' The Techmarine shook his head and the sergeant tapped his helm as he switched to the general vox. 'Squad. Prepare to move on to the next search sector. All units, report your location.'

Meros mentally tallied the names of the warriors as they voxed one after another. The count came a man short.

'Xagan,' Cassiel called his name, his voice harsh and level. 'Status?'

Kaide was already vectoring the monitor bird towards the legionary's last known position. 'There has been intermittent interference on the primary communications channel since we passed the city limits,' he noted. 'The density of the buildings may be affecting the vox.' But it was unlikely, and they all knew it.

Meros toggled a vision mode and an overlay appeared in the lens of his helmet, showing a string of icons indicating the armour status of each warrior in the squad: green for normal, amber for impaired, red for critical. Only the command officer and the unit medicae had access to the telemetry feed, and then only at close range.

Xagan's icon flashed from green to amber, and an instant later a salvo of shots echoed through the cold air.

'Over there!' Cassiel shot forwards like a rocket, mounting the stairs of a walkway three at a time. 'All units, hold station and stand to alert!' He didn't wait for Meros to come after him, knowing that the Apothecary would be quick to follow.

They sprinted over an ice-rimed lawn and a frozen ornamental fountain as another cascade of bolt-shots crashed in the near distance. Meros caught a noise like stone grinding on stone and the tinkle of breaking glass as they vaulted across a stalled groundcar and raced towards a fallen two-storey building.

The icon bearing Xagan's name blinked amber to red, and then went dim.

The entrance was blocked. Cassiel led the way, making handholds in the rockcrete by punching his fingers into the wall. The sergeant rose up over the lintel of the collapsed roof and slid down. Both floors had flattened into one, forming a small atrium of broken stone. Meros halted at the roof level, panning with his bolt pistol, looking for any hostiles.

Down below, an Umbra Ferrox-pattern bolter lay as if discarded on the ground, vapour still curling from its muzzle. There was no sign of Xagan, but the floor of the building was a ragged sink-hole, the edges of it broken into spars of twisted rebar and fractured rock. Cassiel carefully approached the edge and peered down. He pulled a biolume stick from a pouch on his belt and shook it into life, then tossed the object into the fissure. From his vantage, Meros watched the glowing stick fall away, dimming as it grew distant. There appeared to be no bottom to the crack in the ground, and the protruding spars of jagged metal extending out of the walls made it seem like he was staring into the gullet of some monstrous creature.

Cassiel called the missing warrior's name once more, but his resignation was clear in the set of his shoulders. If the sink-hole reached into the hive's underlevels, which extended below almost as far as its towers rose above, there was no way that a legionary, even in full armour, could fall such a distance and survive. The sergeant gathered up the bolter, examining it. 'This wasn't an accident,' he mused. 'Xagan was firing at something. We both heard it. Two-thirds of this magazine has been discharged.'

The words had barely left Cassiel's lips when a bellow of rage and pain carried across the rooftops. Meros's head snapped up, drawn by the sound, in time to see the glassy spire of a gallery tumbling into a cloud of displaced ice and rock dust. 'To the south,' he pointed.

'Harox's men are there,' Cassiel called. 'Don't wait for me, get going!'

Meros broke into a sprint across the line of the lintel and surged into a leap as he reached the edge. The powered muscle-fibres of his armour turned his jump into a powerful bound that took him across the short distance to the next low rooftop. Stone splintered under the impact of his landing, but he

ignored it, running on, picking out the route that would get him to the fallen spire as quickly as possible.

As he moved, he heard Cassiel's voice over the vox. 'All units, enemy contact, unknown vectors. Be ready!'

The Apothecary made one last jump that dropped him in the middle of what had once been a parking bay for automated cabs. Garishly-painted capsule groundcars were partly buried under the rubble of the collapsed spire, and the air was still thick with a haze of dust. Meros peered through the thermal vision blocks of his helmet, sweeping about with his preysight. Immediately, he spotted a line of hot white light emanating from a dozen irregular shapes a few metres distant. Switching back to a normal optical mode, he ventured through the dissipating dust cloud, leading with his bolt pistol.

The Word Bearers were not linked in to the train of status icons, but he had his gauntlet auspex and used it to scan for signs of life.

The readings it returned were confused and nonsensical.

Meros paused, getting his bearings. Somehow, the steel skeleton of the fallen spire had not broken in its collapse. Instead, it lay arched over him, the spines along its length splayed open like grasping metal fingers. Impossibly, whole panes of crystalflex were still in place, their edges bared and sharp. They hung above his head like a canopy of executioners' axes. Dark, oily fluid stained many of them, and more of the liquid was pooling around his boots, steaming as it cooled, staining the layer of frost purple-black.

He came across the first of the warm shapes lying on the ground and disgust clenched in his chest. The irregular forms were pieces of a legionary, cut in hard, fine lines across torso and limb, through joint and neck; ceramite, meat and bone all opened with slices of an immeasurably sharp blade. The slate-coloured armour of the dead Word Bearer was all that identified him, and with a start Meros realised that the purple fluid was the legionary's blood. Despite the horror of the sight before him, the strange vitae filled his thoughts, his senses.

It did not smell like any kind of blood Meros knew, and his Legion *knew blood*. He struggled to frame his thoughts.

The Apothecary's gaze lighted on the shattered half of the Word Bearer's helmet, cut whole from his neck with his head still within, then broken open. What he could see of the face beneath was a ruin of scarification and dense tattooing, but the tone of the skin was all wrong. It was hate-red and twisted. Deformed.

'Get away from him!' Without warning, the Blood Angel was yanked around and pushed back by strong hands. Harox pushed past him, his other Word Bearer battle-brother immediately interposing himself between the Apothecary and the mutilated remains. 'He is dead,' Harox grated. 'Your skills are of no use.'

'I…' Meros faltered, still trying to assimilate what had happened. He raised his medicae gauntlet, presenting the reductor. 'Captain, if you wish I may be able to help you recover Brother–' He paused; aside from Kreed and Harox, none of the other Word Bearers from the *Dark Page* had bothered to name themselves. 'Your battle-brother's gene-seed.'

'I do not wish it,' Harox's words were colder than Holst's snows. 'Be gone, son of Baal. He is fallen and we must mark his loss. In *private*.'

Meros gave a nod and turned away. He threaded back through the ruins to the central parkland of the atrium area, finding Kano and the others dug in, weapons loaded and ready.

Cassiel saw the facts in his silence. ‘Dead?’
‘Dead. One of Harox’s trackers, carved like the carcass of a sand-ox.’
‘Did you see the enemy?’ asked Kano.
‘I saw nothing,’ Meros admitted. ‘Nothing I can explain.’

EIGHT

Helios
The Living City
Exterminatus

The carousel of horrors turned ceaselessly out in the darkness of the void, and Godolfan stepped away from the viewport, shaking his head. He tried to rid himself of the images, the illusions his troubled mind had created. He tried and failed.

'This…' Godolfan was momentarily disoriented and he shrugged it off. 'This is not correct.' His gaze fell to Captain Reznor, but the Blood Angel was distracted, sniffing at the air like a hunting dog.

'The scent.' The captain came forwards, his head tilting up to study the plasteel hemisphere in the ceiling of the *Helios*'s bridge, the lowermost face of the Navigator's habitat module.

Godolfan looked up and saw something glistening around the circular rim of the pressure hatch: a trail of fluid was moving in a slow arc around the hatch's edge towards its lowest point. The dark liquid pooled and surrendered to gravity, emitting a fat droplet to spatter on the deck plates. Instinctively, the shipmaster extended a hand to catch one of the drops. Thick, coppery fluid stained his palm.

'Get back,' ordered the captain, his plasma pistol rising in his fist. Another of Reznor's warriors came to the hatch control and on his commander's nod, he pressed the emergency release.

A sluice of stale blood – more than could ever have been contained in a single body – vomited out of the habitat module and flowed over the floor. Godolfan stumbled back as specks of the cold, sticky liquid struck his cheek.

From inside the unlit space of the habitat, a body in wet-slick robes tumbled out, legs and arms flailing at the air. Its fall was arrested just above the deck, the corpse of the Navigator suspended by trailing ropes of cable.

From the smell of it, the remains were heavily decayed; but that was impossible. Godolfan had spoken with the Navigator less than five hours ago, after they had disengaged from the expeditionary fleet.

'Wounds,' said the other Blood Angel, pointing at the corpse. 'Like claw slashes. Too large to have been self-inflicted.'

'That pod is sealed,' Godolfan insisted. 'Nothing can get in or out!'

There was a sharp cry of horror that the shipmaster recognised as Dequen, and he spun, watching her recoil from her console, her face drained of colour. She had blood on the fingers of her hands. The lieutenant bolted up from her chair, backing away.

Godolfan's first thought was that Dequen had been marked by the same back-splash that had ruined the tunic of his uniform; but then he realised that could not be so, she had been too far away. Around the lieutenant, other members of the bridge crew were following suit, fleeing from their panels in

panic.

'What are you doing?' he demanded. 'Mind your stations, look sharp!'

Reznor pointed with an armoured finger. 'Blood,' he said simply.

Dequen's console, like all the others on the *Helios*'s command deck, was an intricate and finely engineered piece of craftsmanship. It was brass and ivorite, with illuminated crystal buttons and multi-functional tabs, as elegant now as it had been when the cruiser first left the slips. It was also swimming in watery blood, rivulets of the crimson fluid streaming out of the innards of the console. Out of *all* the bridge consoles.

The shipmaster cast around, not understanding what he saw, and found more trails of red issuing from the seams in the bulkheads and around the boles of rivets. The *Helios* was bleeding.

Godolfan heard a strange, atonal screaming that hung in the air. It had no source, it was all around him. It was inside his head. He staggered to the viewport, his vision fogging, and fell against the armourglass wall, feeling the cold of the void outside even through the thick protective layers of the hull.

Outside, the cautious smoke let its tendrils gather around the warship and draw it in towards the dark mass of the depthless veil.

By the time the Word Bearers had returned to the atrium, it had been decided.

'The nephilim must have left hunters in the city, waiting for any rescue force.' Kano watched as Cassiel spoke to Harox. 'Obviously, they're cloaked in some way that renders them invisible to our auspexes.'

'Obviously,' echoed the captain. His voice ground like flint on flint.

The sergeant gestured at the trampled grounds of the small parkland around them. 'This area has good sightlines. We'll hold here and draw them to us. Kaide has seeded the perimeter with tripwires and krak grenades.'

The Techmarine nodded at the sound of his own name, without looking up from the data-slate in his hand. Kaide's servo-skull was still up above them, the drone circling in the eaves of the great roof-dome on an automatic patrol pattern, watching for thermal spikes, listening for the high-frequency pulses of xenos vocalisations.

'Very well.' Harox offered nothing else, and Kano frowned behind his visor. He had expected some display of emotion from the Word Bearer. The captain had just lost one of his men, and yet he behaved as if they were discussing a drill on the parade ground. The Blood Angel knew that his cousins in the XVII Legion were given to demonstrative fury and righteous rages, but he saw nothing of that in the taciturn Harox and his silent comrade. And considering that their search and rescue mission had barely even managed the first aspect of that description, the Word Bearers seemed unconcerned by Cassiel's order to dig in and wait. When Kano tried to put a description to Harox's behaviour, the only word that fit was 'disinterested'.

The warrior looked away. He longed to remove his helmet and take a breath of air that wasn't from the close, recycled atmosphere of his sealed armour, but Cassiel had given the command for all legionaries to remain hooded. The fact was, Holst's toxic air would have been painful to his lungs after more than a couple of breaths, but Kano couldn't ignore the tension building inside him, the borderline claustrophobic pressure at the edge of his senses. *I should have stayed on the flagship*, he told himself. *This place is nothing but a tomb*.

‘We sit and wait, then?’ Sarga asked, pausing as he reloaded his bolter. ‘We lose a Stormbird and two warriors, and we sit and wait?’

‘The enemy are cunning,’ Cassiel replied, his tone silencing the other Blood Angel. ‘Picking off lone men, fading back into the ruins. This is their territory. We have to entice them to give up their cover and strike in the open.’

‘I’ve seen the nephilim up close,’ noted Leyteo. ‘They’re big. Hard to miss. You couldn’t hide one in all this.’

‘True. But they used human slaves on Melchior.’ Sarga pointed towards the dead. ‘Why not here as well?’

‘A conscript-soldier didn’t make Xagan vanish,’ Meros replied. ‘And slaves don’t cut open a legionary.’

Cassiel made a growling noise in the back of his throat and advanced towards the centre of the park. ‘We’ll see the enemy soon enough.’ He shot a look at Kaide. ‘Any comms?’

The Techmarine’s head remained bent, and the wind-rush noise of static from the multiple data channels he was sifting was faintly audible.

Cassiel called his name with all the irritation of one who did not like to repeat himself. ‘Brother Kaide! Your attention!’

Kano saw the Techmarine’s head snap up with a startled jerk, as if he had been awakened from a deep dream. He heard the same rush-sound in his ears, faraway and close all at once. He couldn’t be certain what vox-channel it was emanating from.

‘Sergeant?’ Kaide asked, sounding dazed. He looked at the others. ‘Did you hear that? On the vox, the voice?’

‘What voice?’ said Sarga. ‘I heard nothing.’

Kaide glanced towards Captain Harox, as if he might know the answer.

Five krak grenades detonated simultaneously at different points of the compass as all of the tripwires were sprung at once. The Blood Angels reflexively dropped into firing stances, weapons high, aiming in every direction.

Kano felt a peculiar ripple pass through the ground beneath his feet, and the pounding in his ears became a headache. Through the atmosphere feed in the teeth of his breather mask came the distinct tang of ozone.

He saw Meros and Sarga looking back and forth, trying to see what to shoot at. Kano cycled the vision modes of his helmet optics, but found nothing. That didn’t make sense; even a foe beneath a camo cloak or phase-shunt would leave some kind of visual trace against the background environment.

There’s nothing out there.

The whole park shuddered and tilted downwards, earth groaning as it pitched like the deck of a watercraft in a high swell. The legionaries broke formation and went for safer ground, but there was none.

It wasn’t an earthquake; Holst was almost tectonically inert. Still, hab-block buildings quivered and broken glass pealed as it fell all around them. The black voids behind the shattered windows were sightless eyes.

Across the atrium, a long slab of elevated highway broke in the middle and folded together, scattering vehicles as it swung towards the vertical. Kano’s mouth dropped open: instead of

crumbling, the broken lines of road slapped together with a concussive crash. It reminded him of great crocodilian jaws snapping shut. Then the broken highway shifted. It was falling towards them, as if it had been directed so.

'Scatter!' Cassiel screamed the command into the vox and the warriors broke apart as the shadow fell over them.

The road slabs boomed as they hit the parkland, and Kano saw a Blood Angel vanish beneath, hammered flat in an instant. A torrent of stone dust and displaced ice wheezed up all around them in a vast blanket, reducing visibility to less than a few metres. Kano stumbled forwards, meeting Sarga. The legionary's crimson armour was dirty with a layer of grey powder.

Together they forged ahead as the dust settled, moving towards other shadows that turned out to be the remainder of the squad.

'Contact right,' called a voice, and Kano heard a raucous, clattering sound. It was as if the contents of a scrap yard were being dragged up the side of a granite tor, daggers of steel crunching loudly against stone.

Then the attack began in earnest.

The first thing that tried to kill Kano had a lumen-post for a spine, and a torso and limbs fashioned out of broken highway signs, beheaded traffic signals and other less identifiable pieces of metal debris. It was not a battle robot, for Kano had fought with automata in the training cages and during the year-long Rust Moon War; this thing was animated by some impossible force outside his reckoning. His instinct told him it was powered by *anger*, and that seemed enough understanding for the moment.

The scrap-thing assailed with fingers made from the spokes of a wheel, fat yellow sparks jetting up from the ground where they dragged and slashed. From gaping trash-bin mouths it spat broken screw-bolts and scattershot fragments of wreckage, all of it heated to orange-white.

Kano defaulted to impulse and aimed for the centre of the mass, blasting it back into its parts with a powerful three-round burst. Pieces of it clattered down around him, but they did not lie still. Twisted lengths of metal snaked towards one another, tips finding other tips, bending and braiding, making anew. He spun away. From the corner of his eye, the Blood Angel saw something tumbling out of the sky, trailing smoke – Kaide's drone had been shot down, killing their best tactical advantage.

More of the constructs lurched unsteadily out of the settling haze, drawing fire from all of the warriors. Most were as tall as Dreadnoughts but lacking the density of the venerable war machines. They were thin and spindly, but no single one matched the design of another. The scrap-things were patchwork creations that aped the forms of simians or arachnids or equines, mad sculptures created out of street furniture and wreckage.

There were dozens of them ahead, and more than that behind. Kano blinked, watching one of them come together in the manner of a vid-stream of a demolition played in reverse. He could see no welds or joins holding the pieces in place, detect no electromagnetic fields. Each one of the things had a length of twisting, sinuous cable trailing away behind it, like a leash.

Bolter salvoes thundered around him and he lent his weapon to the chorus, dismantling the constructs over and over. They came on, rebuilding as they went. Adamantium claws scraped over the street and the tiled plaza, ploughing through drifts of snow and stamping frozen corpses into a messy red paste.

'This is what killed Xagan?' Leyteo shouted, incredulous. 'What in the Throne's name are we

shooting at?'

For a long second, Kano felt the urge to know that answer himself. *He could reach out, if he was quick.* Just the lightest brush of his corralled psychic powers, to seek a mind or an intent behind these things…

He saw his battle-brothers and the Word Bearers all around him. *They would see*, Kano told himself. *They would know. It is forbidden.*

'Keep firing,' Cassiel commanded. 'Destroy them!'

At once, the front rank of the junkyard abominations reeled back, resembling archers at the draw. They snapped forwards as one and sent javelins of broken steel hurtling into the lines of the legionaries, the rods of metal ejected from their spindly torsos. One warrior went down, a rusted spear eight metres in length going through his gut to burst out through the coolant pods of his backpack. Kano saw Kaide take a glancing blow that knocked the Techmarine off his feet.

'Fall back–' The rest of the sergeant's words were lost in a moaning rumble from beneath their boots. Pits broke open in the rockcrete all around them, jagged with fangs of split brick. To Kano's horror, they worked like lamprey mouths, grinding and biting at nothing, trying to savage anything that came close.

The ground contorted and rolled underfoot, the wave of motion rippling back over the entire width of the upper city atrium. In a flash of insight, Kano imagined the surface of the park as if it were a blanket cast over a great sleeping beast, just now awakening to find insects crawling upon its back.

Meros fired into one of the open pits and it actually *screamed*, the maw sealing up immediately, shedding thin and malodorous oil.

The legionaries were being pushed towards the broken edge of the great dome, the scrap-monsters coming in from all three facing sides. Kano ejected his bolter's spent magazine and slammed another sickle-shaped clip into the slot, sighting down the gun. As he fired again, he saw the buildings either side of the atrium rock back and forth, shedding more glass and debris.

And then they began to twist. Against possibility, the plasteel frames of the hab towers coiled as the bones of a serpent would bend. The shattered fascias of the buildings glittered in the icy light, the broken balconies and blinded windows taking on the appearance of shouting, angry faces.

Thick cables exploded out from beneath the roadway, whipping at the icy air, fronds of plastek and copper lashing at the stonework. They moved with animal character, snaking forth in the hunt for prey. Support pillars buried in the rock ejected themselves into the air, and upper levels of the atrium complex collapsed one atop another. The mass of the buildings compacted together, breaking and reforming into a new, vast shape. Down in the heart of Holst-Prime's underlevels, the lower tiers were being remade into a structure that resembled spider legs and grasping tentacles. The entire metropolis was in the process of tearing itself free of the bedrock it had been built into.

'Throne and blood…' breathed Kano, his words carried across the vox to all his comrades. 'It's the city. The city wants to kill us.'

The mad dream of it would not end. For a brief moment, Meros wondered if he had been knocked insensate during the Stormbird crash, and even now lay in a healing coma, his mind dredging up this lunacy from his subconscious.

No. Meros had been in that state not long ago, existing in a realm where thought was as real as flesh, and it had almost killed him. He knew this was not illusion; that would have been too simple an

explanation. It seemed as if the insane reality of the nightmare landscape he experienced then had now followed him into this one.

They escaped from the great dome even as the broken edges of the crystalflex hemisphere became lips of a fanged mouth and snapped shut after them. Out in the snows of the open highway, dead vehicles under thick cowls of snow suddenly burst into motion, lurching forwards on skidding, frozen wheels as they tried to bull the legionaries into the walls of the median strip.

It was a hard drop from the elevated road to the surface of Holst's ice plains, but they made it, even with their wounded comrades. Cassiel's orders bid them to put as much distance as possible between them and any element of the city's infrastructure. If their enemy could call on inert objects to assault them, nowhere was safe.

Meros dared to cast a look over his shoulder and saw the highway bending into ribbons, as whatever monstrous malaise had infected the city spread out across the broad bridges.

That was how it seemed to him, like a great disease. An alien cancer had infected Holst-Prime Hive and meta-stasised, corrupting it from within. Adamantium and plasteel, crystalflex and stone, all had become contaminated by some science he could not understand.

That was the only explanation. Reason gave him nothing else to cling to, no other rationale that could possibly fit. But for now the question of *how this could happen* was a distant second to the uncertainty of *how they would survive*.

The city was malforming before his eyes, taking on rudiments of sessile life and ophidians, mimicking legs and grasping limbs as it assembled them from pieces of commerce malls, hab towers and transit complexes. Meros faltered a step as he watched Holst-Prime Hive dragging itself out of the great crater that had been the base of its construction. If this leviathan had a directing intelligence, then it wanted to be free – but more than that, it wanted death to all invaders.

A tentacle-like protuberance made of monorail trains and power cables trailed a slow, giddy, arc through the frosted air and beat at the ground, narrowly missing the line of armoured figures. Ice fractured all around and the heavy kinetic shock pitched them off their feet.

Meros collided with one of the other warriors and they fell together, sliding towards a newly-opened fissure. The Apothecary used the cutting gear on his medicae gauntlet to dig into the ice, anchoring them both. For a moment, his battle-brother swung over the lip of the deadfall, and then clawed his way back, scrambling to his feet once again. There was no time to share words of gratitude; the other Blood Angel helped him up and then they were moving again, making for open ground.

The howling wind over the ice fields warred with the stone-breaking cacophony of the mutant city's birth pangs. Rimes of fresh frost were already collecting in the crevices of Meros's battle plate, and his armour's skin-sensors registered the sharp drop in temperature. Signus Alpha had fallen beneath Holst's horizon and what little warmth the other suns provided was negligible.

Perhaps they might be able to outrun this monstrosity, perhaps it might lose interest in them; and then they would only have to face a punishing cold that would push the capacity of their life-support systems to the red-line. Meros looked to where Cassiel was helping the warrior who had taken the spear-hit. The compromised integrity of his armour would mean certain death.

Then Sarga shouted a warning and thoughts of dying on the ice were forgotten.

'Incoming!'

From beneath the elevated highway at their backs, a gargantuan maggot of warped rockcrete reared

up from under the frozen ground, knocking aside road supports in a rain of falling cars and broken structural antennae. It lolled and rolled, coming at them over the ice like a side-winding snake. It had once been a service conduit for the hive, running vox-cables and geothermal taps out to the neighbouring settlements. Now it was a serpentine thing, an extension of the titanic city-beast.

A volley of concentrated bolter shells exploded across the splintered stone hide of the kilometre-long feeler, followed by the secondary detonations of krak grenades. The crumbling head of the thing broke off and smashed, but the main mass of it still came on, rising up, leaving the ground. Processor fluids drooled from the maw as it wavered before diving to make a strike.

'Damn these xenos!' shouted Leyteo. 'There's nowhere we can go to escape this thing!'

Meros had no answer for him, until two spears of orange fire shrieked past above them and pierced the stone serpent along its length. Spheres of force bifurcated the construct and ripped it into fragments, the thrashing tail losing all coherence and falling to the ice. For a moment, Meros thought he heard a distant bellow of agony, deep and booming like winds forced through cavernous halls of stone and metal.

Then it was gone, replaced by the glorious noise of rocket engines. A great crimson hawk flashed past and performed a sharp turn upon the tip of its wing, before settling into a shaky hover on plumes of thruster exhaust. Buffeted by the heavy gale, the Stormbird could not settle to land.

A familiar voice crackled over the general vox. 'Scout force, this is Captain Amit. What in Terra's name have you found?' There was a hesitance in the captain's voice that Meros had never heard before.

'I'll explain later, sir,' Cassiel responded. 'We need to get off this rock.'

'Before it comes back,' added Sarga.

Lines extended from the underside of the drop-ship and the legionaries took the mag-locks at their ends and connected them to their armour. Meros tried not to think of how much the recovery lines looked like the same snaking cables that had raced after them in the city, and locked on. Then Amit's Stormbird powered away, reeling them in as it climbed skywards.

Black-armoured hands dragged Meros in through the ventral hatch, and he was dimly aware of Warden Annellus's skull-helm glaring back at him. He turned away, wiping frost from his eye slits. The Apothecary's last sight of Holst-Prime Hive was a giant's hand made of broken buildings atop an arm taller than an Imperator Titan. He watched it snatch at the vessel and miss, falling apart as it collapsed back towards the surface.

Cassiel's squad and the Word Bearers sat silently on the landing bay's deck as the beat of air resistance gave way to the smoothness of vacuum. Meros's helmet came off in his hands and he found himself looking across at Kano. His friend's eyes were glazed and distant, focused on a point beyond the far bulkhead.

A shadow fell over the Apothecary, but he didn't look up. The Warden stood over him, surveying the survivors as Captain Amit emerged through the forward hatch.

The sergeant rose and saluted. 'Sir. Your timing could not have been better.'

Amit dismissed his thanks with a curt nod. 'I brought ships to assist in the *Hermia*'s mission. The *Victus* was in closer orbit, so I offered to take on the search for you myself. I wanted to look upon the enemy.' He paused. 'Is that what I saw, brother-sergeant?'

'I'm a warrior, not a scholar,' Cassiel replied. 'Which, begging the captain's pardon, means I don't have the first bloodless inkling of what we were shooting at.'

The steady thrumming of the Stormbird's engines filled the silence in the landing bay, but not so much that Meros missed the single whispered word that fell from the lips of Warden Annellus.

'*Sorcery.*'

A buzzing tone sounded over the Stormbird's internal vox. 'Attention, this is the flight deck. Brace for combat manoeuvres!'

Amit tapped the comm-bead in his gorget. 'Pilot, report! We detected no other ships out here. What is the threat?'

The crew-serf's voice was tense. 'It's not a ship, captain… It's the planet. It's shooting at us.'

'It doesn't want to let us go,' said Kano quietly.

Sanguinius came to Holst to see for himself.

The engagement was already well under way as they came into visual range. The *Hermia*, along with the *Victus* and her escort cruisers, *Sable* and *Paleknight*, were connecting back to the planet's surface with the glittering, impermanent red threads of mega-lasers, but at first it was not clear what enemy the other ships had come across.

The primarch's flagship hove closer, the *Red Tear* flanked by the *Ignis* and the *Covenant of Baal*, the vessels temporarily detached from the main body of the fleet out in open space. Scans searching for conventional weapons discharges registered only the barrages coming from the orbiting cruisers; returns from Holst itself showed a chaotic mess of interference patterns.

Then a missile made of dense rock, most likely the head of a great mountain from Holst's equatorial zone, threw itself out of the hive-world's gravity well. A singular, incredible release of volcanic power ejected the mass into the orbital path of the *Paleknight*, at such speed that the cruiser's fusion thrusters were not sufficient to set it on a different heading.

The collision lit a small, brief sun over Holst's night side. The starship's back was instantly broken, and it came apart in clouds of venting atmosphere and plasmatic discharges.

Even as the cruiser perished, the planet was spewing more molten hate into the sky. Scatter-shot clouds of stone briefly became flaming meteors as they crossed the ice world's thin atmospheric membrane, against all reason screaming upwards at the Blood Angels ships. The *Victus* took hits across its flank and the *Hermia* lost great divots of hull metal as the hurled rocks gouged valleys in the thick armour of her prow.

The Angel's wings closed tightly over his back as the *Paleknight* fell away from him, vanishing into the grey haze of Holst's churning atmosphere.

'How many were on that ship?' asked a tremulous voice from across the bridge; it was a junior rating who had spoken, protocol forgotten in the shock of the moment.

'Eight full squads of legionaries.' Sanguinius's reply seemed to come from a very great distance. 'Nearly a hundred times that number of crew.' He didn't look away from the great viewing window as he gave a new order. 'Admiral DuCade. Action orders to all ships. Draw back from Holst, beyond the range of those attacks.'

The command was passed on, and they drew away, seething comets of magma snapping at their sterns.

The primarch's Guard Commander bent over the flagship's hololith, grimacing. The panes of data and imagery streaming up from the scrying arrays were outside his comprehension. 'The mass index of Holst is altering,' said Azkaellon, reading the impossible words aloud. 'The planet's dimensions

are shifting. It's shrinking. Changing.'

'The same as Phorus,' offered Zuriel from his side. 'Another… sign?'

'No.' Sanguinius shook his head. 'This is something else.' He pointed. 'See.'

Behind the *Victus* and the other vessels, the blue-white world was becoming a balled fist of ice and rock, wreathed in a halo of blackened ejecta of such turbulent power that the glittering ring system around Holst was breaking up.

'What kind of weapon can fire objects of such dimension from a planetary surface?' Azkaellon looked up, questioning anyone who would meet his gaze. 'There's no mass driver ever built that could do it. The power requirement alone would be immense!'

But none of the crew, human or legionary, could look away from the great viewport. Centred in the great armourglass window, Holst's surface was partly visible through clouds of volcanic ash and chemical fog. It resembled a seething mass of colossal serpentine forms, shifting and changing. The icy landscape had become a cancerous husk in constant motion, and the writhing form played tricks on the eye, seeming to resemble faces that bellowed and spat.

When the Sanguinary Guard's master spoke again, there was a wintry, rigid fury under every word that he uttered. 'Our blood will not be shed by those who dare not show themselves. There will be no death without reciprocity here. On my Legion, I swear it.'

'Contact from Captain Amit,' reported Zuriel. 'The *Victus*, *Sable* and *Hermia* are entering formation with us. *Hermia* reports major damage, but it is still operational.' He hesitated. 'Orders, my lord?'

'This ends,' said Sanguinius. 'Admiral DuCade, slave gun control on all vessels present to my word of command. Tell every shipmaster to prime their cyclonic torpedoes and megaweapon-gauge systems for full bombardment. Target Holst.'

A ripple of uncertainty passed through the human crew at the thought of such mammoth overkill. 'All weapons? Against the hive-city?' DuCade asked.

'Against the planet,' corrected the primarch. 'Synchronize aim-points along the equator, track for geological flux. I want this world shattered.'

Azkaellon felt a chill run through him. The hammer of the Emperor's will was a powerful force, and in the wars of the Great Crusade it had often been regrettably necessary to punish whole worlds with ruthless intent. The Guard Commander had seen cities wiped off the map in the blink of an eye, vaporised by lance cannons and macronuclear bombs; continents seared by laser barrages; skies scorched.

And while the power to kill a world – to truly, utterly *destroy* it – had always rested within the reach of the Legiones Astartes, it was not an order that Azkaellon had ever witnessed in execution.

'All shipmasters report guns at ready.' DuCade read back the status in a dead voice, as if she was unwilling to believe what would come next. 'Your will, my lord.'

Azkaellon did not feel any less of the primarch's anger at the destruction of the *Paleknight*, he knew that no one aboard these sister-ships felt otherwise; but the act of war that was before them still gave him pause.

Finally, Sanguinius turned away from the great window and looked his old friend and comrade in the eye. In the Angel's noble face there was at once a great distance that reminded Azkaellon of just how far his master was set above even his superior transhumanity. And within it, he saw a determination, dense as neutronium and equally unbreakable.

‘My patience with this shadow-play is at an end,’ said the primarch, and the words seemed to be for Azkaellon alone. ‘The order is given: *exterminatus extremis*.’

The void surrounding the planet Holst flashed crimson as energies were liberated and directed, as a surge of weapons of mass destruction hurtled from launch tubes and bore down upon the turbulent world.

Energy pulses struck first, moving at the speed of light and boiling away the vapours shrouding the sky, punching into the nitrogen ice surface. Rocky under-strata that had been sealed beneath permafrost for millions of years were burned clean and exposed. The torpedo barrage came seconds after, great fusion-powered rockets tipped with lethal warheads. Each had the power to lay waste to a continent, but in this instance they were combined with force enough to spear the molten heart of a world.

Whatever unreal influence had spread its cancerous instrumentality through Holst-Prime Hive spilled into the matter of the planet itself. On some primitive level, perhaps the world had even become alive, transformed by dark power into an almost-consciousness.

But it died now, perishing in revenge for the deaths of the crew of the *Paleknight*, for Brother Xagan and all the other legionaries. Dying for the offence its existence gave to the Angel Sanguinius.

Like a tormented animal, the planet ended with a tortured scream that even the void could not silence.

NINE

A Coward's Weapon
The Librarius
Summoning

'We brought a shadow back with us,' said Meros, the words coming to him unbidden. His gaze remained firmly locked on a blank point on the plasteel bulkhead across the chamber from where he stood, his focus unwavering.

'A shadow.' First Captain Raldoron was at the edge of his line of sight, the crimson of his battle plate stark against the grey metal walls. The compartment on board the *Red Tear* was a secure holding chamber, of the kind the Legion would use if prisoner transport or confinement was required. 'What do you mean by that?'

Raldoron was the red; to his left, in the centre, Guard Commander Azkaellon was the gold, his fine artificer armour rendered dull and flat in the bleak gloom; and High Warden Berus, hastily embarked from the *Chalice*, was the black at the far side. The three warriors were there to judge Meros and his words, along with those of everyone who had ventured down to the surface of Holst.

'When the ships that killed that blighted hell returned to the fleet, there was a change.' He glanced at Berus. 'I know you have seen it.'

'We ask the questions, brother.' Azkaellon was quick to admonish the Apothecary.

Berus answered nonetheless. 'I have seen it,' he agreed; his rasping voice was an animal growl. 'It is days now since we passed inside the orbit of Signus VI, and left that world killed and broken. The mood of the Legion has shifted. While the mission to Holst-Prime Hive was undertaken, word came to us of the final communication from the starship *Helios*…' He trailed off, thinking. 'Lost with all hands under strange circumstances.'

Meros gave a humourless grunt. 'We have been beset by "strange circumstance" since the moment we arrived in the Signus Cluster, Warden.'

'He isn't wrong,' noted Raldoron.

'Our Legion has shed more blood than this during the Crusade,' Azkaellon retorted. 'You speak as if we shrink from it.'

'With all due respect, my lord,' said Meros, 'I said nothing of the kind.' Outwardly, he maintained a steady countenance, but inwardly the Blood Angel was on edge. Any one of the warriors in this room had the power of an entire battle company at their fingertips; they were legendary figures with honour rolls that spanned hundreds of years of warfare – and he was no more than a legionary of the line, a lowly tactical squad medicae.

Yet he could not let himself be cowed. He risked a glance at Captain Raldoron, wondering what intentions moved behind that impassive face. Azkaellon carried himself with an air of eternal arrogance, Berus with a manner that was as watchful as a hawk, like his brother Annellus. But

Raldoron… His aspect was unreadable, like the unchanging scowl of a combat helm.

The fleet was on the move, at battle speed now, crossing wide of the White River asteroid belt in a half-loop over the plane of the ecliptic, towards the inner planets and a direct speed course to Signus Prime. The command had been passed through every vessel, every company. The primarch's patience was wearing thin, and the orders from Warmaster Horus – to oust the enemy that had taken the Signus Cluster – were still their prime motive.

But while the Legion had been marking time, sparring and preparing for open war, Meros and his brothers were held aside, isolated from the rest of their company. Only Captain Harox and his surviving battle-brother had been allowed to leave the *Red Tear* to return to the *Dark Page*, and even then under sufferance. It was said that Acolyte Kreed had not set foot off his ship since the conclave of commanders, the Word Bearers vessel moving silently alongside the flagship and offering nothing but the most terse communications. Meros wondered about the *other* observers at large in the fleet; no one had mentioned the whereabouts of Helik Redknife's Space Wolves.

'We have listened to your after-action report,' said Berus, producing a data-slate. 'The best that can be said is that it corresponds with those of your squad mates, in the broadest strokes.'

Meros nodded. He had done his best to keep his debrief on the *Victus* as succinct and to the point as possible, but the anomalous events he had lived through in Holst-Prime Hive proved difficult to render into such colourless language. Along with Kano and Sarga, Cassiel and Leyteo, Kaide and the rest – even Captain Amit and Warden Annellus – the eye-witness description of what he had encountered on the ice world was now a matter of Legion record.

Berus went on, looking at the slate's oval screen. 'I read this with equal dread and disbelief, Brother Meros. What you say you saw defies logic and possibility.'

'I did not lie,' Meros insisted. 'And if my mind was clouded in some way, it was so subtle I never knew it.' He looked at Azkaellon. 'Is that what *you* think? You were aboard the flagship, sir. You saw the planet.'

'From *orbit*,' the Guard Captain corrected. 'I saw no monstrous amalgams of metal and stone.'

'But you did hear the scream.' He said it before he was aware of it, and instantly Meros regretted his reply.

Azkaellon's expression became stony.

'We all heard it.' Raldoron spoke before the Sanguinary Guard could respond.

'Another psychological weapon,' Berus insisted. 'Transmitted across all vox-channels, broadcast in a resonant wave. A known tactic of the xenos.'

'A coward's weapon.' Azkaellon's lip curled, and he glared at Meros. 'Meant to undermine the steady mind.'

If the Guard Commander was baiting him, looking for a reaction, the Apothecary refused to provide it. Finally, it was Raldoron who spoke.

'You are dismissed, brother-medicae. Return to your unit and await further orders.'

Meros hesitated. He had questions of his own, and he wanted answers; but one look from the First Captain told him that he would not have them today.

The Apothecary gave the salute of the aquila and marched out, smothering his doubts as best he could.

The lighter settled in the *Encarnadine*'s number six cargo bay on thick, jointed legs that hissed under

the weight of the transporter's load. A gaggle of servitors immediately swarmed towards the craft, ready to gather up the supplies within and carry them off to the pneu-trams that would ferry the containers back and forth along the keel passages.

Even though the Blood Angels fleet was at condition one, combat ready, a handful of intraship transport movements were still taking place. The heightened alert state did not prevent one from venturing ship to ship, but it did make it harder to do so without good cause. To travel across the flotilla without a formal waiver or a marque of liberty was to court censure at least and a court martial at worst.

Kano had managed it, though. He was canny and careful, charting a course that wove back and forth over the ships of the fleet, in the span of a day making his journey from the *Red Tear* to the vessels in the great assembly's spinward quadrant. He rode in tankers, Stormbirds and shuttles. He made himself as unremarkable as a gene-forged could, his armour left behind on the battle-barge, his face lost beneath a set of hooded robes. It was a busy fleet, and the adjutant of a First Captain knew how it worked.

Kano stepped down onto the *Encarnadine*'s echoing deck and glanced around. His arrival went unnoticed, and that was just as he wished it. To have come here under official lights would have meant answering questions, and he wasn't ready to do that. Not just yet.

Walking with purpose, he crossed the cargo bay towards one of the wide transit elevator platforms, schooling his manner so that any who might look upon him in passing would not consider the Blood Angel out of place.

The elevator gantry was two leaves of filigreed brass, one atop another, and they slowly and gracefully peeled back to grant access to the lift. As he paused to wait, the sense of someone else behind him became clear; despite himself, the legionary allowed a small smile to form on his face.

'Hello, Brother Kano.' Another warrior, also out of his battle plate and robed in similar fashion, came to stand beside him and lingered. 'It's been a while.'

'Not as long as it seems.' The elevator opened to them and they boarded. The platform began a lazy ascent that would take several minutes, riding from the cargo bay at the bottom of the *Encarnadine*'s ventral sail to the core decks of the great cruiser. Shallow pillars of rectangular containers surrounded them, rising as tall as houses, arranged in neat two-by-two rows. The shadows the modules cast concealed them; the warriors were quite alone.

The other legionary rolled back his hood, revealing an olive-skinned face with narrow, steely eyes. A thin black beard came off his chin like lines of ink on a pen-sketch, and he seemed gaunt. Kano's memories of the man were out of place. He recalled that face wearing the crystal-and-steel matrix of a psychic hood, not bare and shorn as it was now.

'Brother Ecanus.' Kano offered his hand, pulling back his own hood with the other. 'Well met.'

'That remains to be seen.' Ecanus accepted the gesture, and Kano saw the conflict in him. His old friend knew that they were not meant to convene under such clandestine circumstances.

'How did you know I would be here?' Kano asked.

'I had an inkling,' said Ecanus. 'Wasn't sure until I saw you step out of that lighter's airlock.' He looked away, watching the deck levels drop past them as they rose higher and higher. 'The Wardens won't see us here, fate willing. You've come to talk.'

Kano nodded. 'To a brother, yes.'

Before the Decree of Nikaea, Brother Ecanus had served the Blood Angels as a battle-psyker in the

202nd Company. And like Kano, he had accepted the orders that made the use of his skills taboo. Kano remembered days of sharing wars with Ecanus; he had a particular affinity for a power they knew as 'the Lance', the conjuring of a great spear of telekinetic force with which to strike down the Legion's foes. To think of the warrior before him without it diminished Ecanus in a way that struck Kano with a brief dart of melancholy.

'Things are different now,' Ecanus said, as if he sensed his thoughts. 'Our duty asks other things of us.' He paused. 'Brother, as much as it pleases me to see you, there are conventions we challenge by meeting this way. In secret.'

'No order stands that says two battle-brothers cannot share a conversation.'

'Not formally, no.' Ecanus's hands came together, fingers meshing. 'But when the Emperor spoke the edict, the Legion put distance between our kind for a reason.'

Kano couldn't stop the scowl that pushed its way forwards. 'Well, damn Berus or any Warden who dares challenge me. I won't be treated like a exile-in-waiting and tarred by the foolishness of others!'

Ecanus eyed him. 'Is that what you came out here to say to me?'

He's as perceptive as ever, Kano thought. 'Not that, no.' He sighed. 'I came to you because I must speak of something that only you would understand.'

'This is to do with the killing of the planet Holst? Word of the primarch's order spread quickly through the fleet.'

Kano shook his head. 'That may be a ripple from the same fallen stone. No, brother. Before that, before we even reached the Signus Cluster.' Now it was time to say the words aloud, Kano found it hard to form them. His throat was suddenly arid. 'There was a dream,' said the former Librarian. 'A vision of potency that came to me as I meditated. I did nothing to seek it.' Remembering it now, he felt his pulse race. 'But *powerful*, brother. Strong and dark and deep.' He took a slow breath. 'I was falling, and there was–'

'A red angel.' Ecanus whispered it. 'A blood-stained seraph, reaching out.' He raised his hands in the exact mirror of the apparition Kano had experienced. 'I saw it too.'

Meros sensed the grim, gallows-walk mood of the infirmary as he passed through its halls. Outside of an actual combat engagement, when the medical centre was healing the wounded and tending to the dying, it was typically quiet. It was so now, but in a different way. The air felt heavy with despair, and there were many more crewmen and Legion-serfs at large in the corridors. Those of them who dared to look up at the Blood Angel as he passed did so with open fear on their faces. In his mind's eye, Meros saw them and remembered the frozen corpses on the streets of Holst-Prime. They seemed like two sides of the same coin: alive and dead, here and there.

Humans were so frail, even in the absence of wounds. It was hard for the legionary to imagine that he had once been like them, before he survived the trials and earned the right to gene-implantation and enhancement. He had pity for them, the ones who would forever remain ordinary. They would never see the universe as clearly as he did, never be so certain and sure of purpose…

The thought curdled. *What am I certain of now?* Meros asked himself. His rigid, ordered view of things was being challenged. Assumptions the warrior had built his life upon were turning to sand, falling through his fingers.

I have travelled far and I have seen the incredible, he thought. *That is a gift I was given in return for my service to this Legion*. But until Signus, he had never experienced the *impossible*. That was

the shadow of which he had spoken, and one look in the eyes of Raldoron and the other commanders had made truth clear to him.

They know it too.

The sensation that came with the realisation was strange and new. A prickling cold across the surface of his thoughts, a hollow in his chest. Could it be… an echo of fear?

Impossible. That word again.

'There is nowhere we fear to tread,' Meros muttered, the words of the inscription in Baal's Sepulchre of Heroes returning to him.

'Hey!' Someone was calling out, jogging towards the Apothecary, and with that his moment of introspection disintegrated. 'Lord Meros!' It was Gerwyn, the remembrancer he had met aboard the *Hermia*. The man seemed smaller than he recalled, as if his clothes were hanging too large upon him.

The Blood Angel gave him a nod. 'You transferred to the flagship, then.'

'Aye,' Gerwyn returned the gesture, his hands moving, nervous with energy. The sequentialist's eyes were haloed in grey and his complexion was pale. 'I'm billeted with the rest of the troupe up in the Swan Tower.'

Meros knew of it: a golden minaret on the dorsal surface of the *Red Tear*, largely used for ceremonial purposes. The primarch had graciously turned it over to the remembrancer contingent so that they could make it their own.

Gerwyn was still talking, idle words of little interest to the Apothecary about the man's relationships with the artists, playwrights and journalists who documented the fleet's mission. Meros noted something, and pointed.

'Where is your drawing slate? Did you lose it?'

'No, no. Not at all. I, uh, I just don't have it with me.'

That seemed like an odd thing to Meros. A scribe without a notebook was like a legionary unarmed: incorrect, incomplete. He said as much.

'Ah, you see true.' Gerwyn deflated a little. 'In all honesty, I have not had the focus in recent days to complete my serial. The illustrations go undone, the text half-conceived.' He waved a hand in front of his eyes. 'Troubled sleep, that's the root cause.' From a pocket, he produced a tiny envelope and opened it. Inside there were two white capsules. 'I came down here to ask your brother-medicae for respite, lord. They say these will help me rest.'

The pills were somnolents, strong by human standards. 'They will do so indeed.'

Gerwyn gave him a doubtful look. 'I hope for some brief oblivion.' He gave a weak chuckle. 'I'm forgetting what sleep feels like.'

'I don't sleep,' Meros told him. 'The warriors of the Legiones Astartes are beyond that need.'

'Huh.' Gerwyn rolled the tablets around in his palm before returning them to the envelope. 'I don't know if I should be envious or commiserate with you for that.'

'Explain.'

The remembrancer baulked, as if Meros had done something to frighten him. 'No, it's… it's just that I want to sleep but I can't. It's hard to. After what happened in the chambers.' Gerwyn must have seen the frown on the Blood Angel's face. 'You know about the suicides? And the ones who went mad, out of nowhere?'

Meros thought of the frenzy he had glimpsed in the eyes of the Stormbird pilot. 'I know.'

Gerwyn leaned closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. 'Do you know how many?

Over a dozen in the Swan Tower alone, and not in the quiet way of it. Horrors, lord. Horrors to hold a man awake at night.'

'There are more beyond the eight?'

'Eight?' Gerwyn's eyes went wide and he almost choked on the word. 'Eight *hundred*, more like! I've heard word from a sculptor on the *Chalice* of enginseers choking themselves with spindle oil. They say the sergeant-at-arms on a picket destroyer ate his own lasgun.' He backed away, blinking as he regained his composure. 'None of your kind, mind. Only the lesser of us…' His voice trailed off into a shudder. 'I should go. Forgive my interruption. Begging your pardon.' Gerwyn made a clumsy bow and marched off at a pace.

For a long moment, Meros stood in the infirmary corridor, turning over the serialist's words in his mind. Eventually, he went to a cogitator alcove in one of the secondary laboratoria and activated a data-trawl.

A machine-slave stuttered into life. 'I exist to serve,' it piped.

The Apothecary spoke into the vox pick-up. 'Death notices. Sort by the following criteria. Time index, Signus Cluster arrival to present. Non-legionary only. Self-inflicted trauma.' He paused. 'Unusual circumstances. Begin.'

'Compliance,' said the machine. On the gas-lens screen above the cogitator, panes of data began to appear, one overlaid across the next.

There were many more than eight.

Kano blinked, struggling to take in what his battle-brother had told him. The way of the psyker's path was complex and always in flux, and he had learned in his first years of service to the Legion that his greatest weapon was also the gateway to madness and destruction. Too many times, Kano had fought renegade telepaths or mutants fuelled by baleful psychic fires, and seen them consumed by the very warp energies they had tried to master.

The vision of the bloody-winged spirit that had assailed him in his vivid dream had not faded with the passing of the days. It was this sight that had compelled him to seek some kind of answer, first following his curiosity down to Holst with Meros and the others, there confronting more signs and lunacy. And now, leading him to Ecanus.

The vision had been so potent, so very personal, that it seemed as if it had been ripped from the deepest halls of Kano's psyche. *From the threads of my soul*, he thought, *if there is such a thing*.

How could another have experienced so powerful a vision that was so much alike in detail? Kano listened as Ecanus relayed his own experience, unable to speak. Every factor was similar, every instant unchanged.

Only one thing seemed different, one small detail. 'The eyes of the thing,' said Kano. 'Were they familiar to you? Known, but lost in memory, impossible to place.'

Ecanus shook his head. 'I looked into its eyes. But they were not known to me. Whatever that angel of pain is, I'm thankful he isn't of my comradeship.'

They both fell silent, yellow strobe lights playing over them in shifting waves as the elevator continued its long climb past service decks and storage tiers.

'I never expected this,' Kano admitted. 'I came to ask your advice and instead find common cause.' He glanced at his old comrade, his mind racing. 'The others – Brother Deon and Brother Salvator. Novenus and the rest of them…' The names of other Librarians – Epistolaries, Codiciers and

Lexicaniums – turned in his thoughts. He wondered where in the fleet they all were, and what questions they were asking. 'What if they saw this too?'

'What did we see?' Ecanus asked darkly. 'I don't know. I touch the memory of that dream with even a momentary thought and my hearts tighten in my chest. My skin becomes ice. I smell smoke and blood and decay.' He grimaced. 'And now you say you have shared it with me. I can no longer dismiss it as if it were some trick of the brain.'

The platform rose ever upwards. Kano stared at the floor, half-expecting it to open up and swallow him back down into the depths. 'If you and I saw the red angel, and the others did too–'

'What?' Ecanus's voice hardened. 'Shall we venture out, you and I, and secretly comb the fleet for every psyker stripped of his hood, question and gather… And then what?'

'We go to the Angel. He will listen to us. He shares the gift.'

Ecanus shook his head. 'We would never be permitted to see him! Between them, Azkaellon and Berus know everything that happens within the Legion. What suspicion do you think they would build if they learned of this intent?'

'They would imagine a transgression alike to the disobedience of the Thousand Sons.' The voice came from all around them, rough and broken.

Kano whirled, his hand slipping beneath his robes for the combat knife holstered there. 'Who speaks?' he shouted, his words echoing off the containers. 'Show your face!'

'That was my intention.' A figure hove out of the shadows, and like the two Blood Angels he was hooded. Unlike the dark earthy tones of their robes, however, the new arrival's attire was frost-grey. The lights of a passing deck threw a sheet of illumination across the elevator platform, exposing a craggy face with a white beard, and long hair chained in plaits, adorned with stone beads and metal rings.

The bare skin about the other legionary's throat was detailed with runic tattoos, and Kano saw threads of leather and copper beneath the robe. Carved items made of ebony and bone rattled as he walked.

'Son of Russ,' said Ecanus. 'Rune Priest.'

Kano's eyes narrowed and he eased his grip on the blade. 'You are Redknife's brother. Your name is Stiel.'

'Aye,' said the Space Wolf. He halted and bowed slightly. 'Apologies. I did not mean to alarm you.'

His lip curled. 'When you arrived, you wouldn't speak High Gothic. Suddenly you do?'

Stiel gave a casual shrug. 'What makes you think I speak it now, Blood Angel?' He made a motion with his finger, a circle to include the three of them. 'Divisions of birth world and Legion aside, we share commonalities that make us kindred, after a fashion.'

'I don't know you,' Kano insisted. 'I've shared nothing with you.'

The Rune Priest smiled, showing canine teeth studded with silver rivet heads. 'We shared your journey from the *Red Tear*. Inaction has made your skills dull, cousin. You forgot how to see me.'

Kano paused, thinking. There *had* been moments during his passage when he thought he sensed a presence nearby, a motion at the corner of his eye, but he had ignored it, his mind occupied by other concerns.

'And more than that,' Stiel continued. 'The sight. The dream. The red angel and the fall.'

Ecanus studied the Space Wolf carefully. 'Your captain. He sent you?'

'No. This matter is only for us. At least until we can make sense of it.' For the first time, Kano

heard something like doubt in the Rune Priest's tone. 'I will say what you will not, Blood Angel. There is a dark power at work in the Signus Cluster, and we are only now perceiving the ragged edges of it. The veil and the star of eight carved in the surface of a planet, a world gone mad, flesh without bone, and the dream, the dream, *the dream*…' He closed his eyes. 'We cannot turn away from it.'

'The unsanctioned use of psychic ability is an act of treason,' Ecanus reminded them. 'We are watched because of that, because of what we are!'

'You have no need to tell a Space Wolf of the dangers of a mind unchecked,' Stiel replied, with a feral snarl.

Kano went on. 'He's right. Something is amiss. We need to know the full scope of it.' His eyes narrowed. 'By the Throne, I think we need to be *ready*.'

'To do what?' Ecanus shot him a look. 'To defy a command from the Emperor and Sanguinius?' He turned his glare on Stiel. 'That might be easy for you, but not me. Not *us*. I've heard the stories from the other Legions, with their flouting of protocol, their hidden fellowships, their *lodges*.' He shook his head. 'This is not the way of the Blood Angels. We leave behind the separation of tribe and clan on Baal. We transcend our roots.' The warrior sighed. 'We have unity, in the Angel's name.'

'And yet, you are still divided.' The Space Wolf cocked his head. 'Perhaps it takes an outsider to see it. You sons of Baal, with your Wardens and your warrior elite in gold, your winged master in the clouds high above the ranks of red.'

'You don't know us,' Ecanus shot back.

'As you wish,' Stiel demurred. 'But I know this: your words will mean nothing if darkness strikes a divided house.'

Kano laid a hand on his comrade's shoulder. 'This is not treason, Ecanus. We only speak of brother talking to brother, sharing a common concern.'

'Others will not see it that way.'

'That,' said Stiel, 'is why others must not see it.'

As Harox knew he would be, Tanus Kreed was furious at the battle captain's unexpected arrival.

Every servant son of the Legion knew the importance of the rituals, and a warrior as highly placed as he knew it more than most. Harox bore marks that had come from such moments of communion, burned into his skin and his soul. He had felt the sweet kiss of the warp during his pilgrimage.

But the Acolyte's anger faded away and became rapt attention with the passing of the moment, the interruption soon dismissed. Kreed's arms fell into a fold, the bloody short-sword in his right hand hanging forgotten, pointing to the deck. Harox's commander paid no mind to the rivulets of fluid dripping off the tip, tapping lightly on the black iron floor and pooling around the bare feet beneath his surplice.

As Harox gave his report, the arching, gloomy corridor outside the sacellum muffled his words in a strange way, deadening the air so that they did not carry. The Word Bearer's clipped diction had always been harsh, a remnant of an old wound to his throat that had not mended well. With his helm removed it made his grating voice ring in his ears like the snapping of small bones.

'The signal was detected by Amit's ship, *Victus*,' he explained.

'It's real?' Kreed wondered aloud.

Harox nodded. 'You would know better than I, Lord Acolyte.' The plans of the higher ranks were

always a mystery to him, and more often than not, needlessly so.

Kreed didn't bother to address that. 'Did they reveal the contents of the message?'

The legionary shook his head. The report from the *Red Tear* had been direct and to the point, mercifully free of the usual verbose pomposity the sons of Sanguinius liked to heap on their formal communications. A faint vox-signal on an Imperial Army fleet frequency had been detected by a crew-serf aboard the *Victus*. It had no vocal content, only a numeric code string that matched a standard military distress call. The most likely explanation was that an automated beacon was broadcasting, but at a power level so faint it had not registered until now.

'The asteroid belt might have blocked detection,' Kreed mused. 'A ship, then? One that escaped the cull?' He clucked his tongue. 'Careless.'

'Not in space,' Harox corrected. 'Transmission was traced to the fifth world, Scoltrum. No other returns. No life detections.'

'Ah, of course. The agri-colony.'

The captain recalled what he had learned before embarking on the mission. Signus V was a bread-basket planet – a large, windswept sphere in the habitable radius of the triple suns. Wildly fertile, it had been transformed into a patchwork of continent-sized farms to feed the Signus Cluster's colonists and grow trade stock for the greed of decadent Terra and the core worlds.

Harox had known immediately what was going to happen. Sanguinius would not let such a discovery go unchecked, even if his captains warned him otherwise.

Kreed knew it too. 'The Angel's heart bleeds too much for the humans,' he grinned. 'If there is the slightest chance survivors might still be alive down there, he will send ships to see. His weakness will compel him to do it.' The Acolyte sniffed. 'For all the great potential of the Blood Angels primarch, I sometimes find it hard to believe that being shares true brotherhood with our master, Lorgar.'

This much was true; Harox doubted that the lord of the Word Bearers would have been so easily swayed by the small concerns of the un-Enlightened. 'Raldoron suspects a trap,' he went on. 'As does Amit.'

'Of course,' agreed his commander. 'But Captain Amit won't let that stop him from going.'

'Not him,' Harox said, with a curt shake of the head. 'Nakir of the 24th Company has been given the order. Ships have already been deployed.'

'Good. That's good.' Kreed toyed with the sword, rolling the grip in his hand. 'Better Nakir goes and dies out there. We don't want the Flesh Tearer to put himself at undue risk over some minor trivia. Amit will be of use to us when the time comes. Of all of them, he's walked the greatest distance along the scarlet path.'

Harox fell silent for a moment, processing his thoughts. This was an unexpected turn of events, after all. 'Erebus said there would be no survivors out here. How is this even possible?'

Kreed's eyes narrowed, and jealousy glittered behind them. 'Dare I suggest that Lord Erebus's insight may not be as perfect as some wish to believe?'

'The Dark Apostle would not be pleased to hear you say that,' noted the captain.

Kreed's nostrils flared. 'Erebus isn't here.'

Harox cocked his head, glancing casually into the depths of the corridor's shadows. 'Are you certain?'

The Acolyte's irritation returned in a rush at the veiled threat, and he gestured sharply with the

heavy pommel of the short sword, making stabbing motions. ‘Keep the *Dark Page* at arm’s length from the Blood Angels and maintain vox silence. Now, go. And if you dare to interrupt a rite again, if the matter is anything less than the heat death of the universe, I’ll take your hearts for it!’

Harox dutifully bowed, but Kreed had turned his back on him and was already stalking away to the sacellum’s door, leaving a trail of bloody footprints.

The octagonal portal rotated open, the entrance turning on a central pillar-hinge. Harox caught the odour of hot stone and rust, and the cloudy air trembled with the hollow tone of a woman weeping. He watched a headless servitor hand Kreed another, identical sword as the Acolyte crossed the threshold; then the door was closing again and the gloom returned.

Harox heard a whispering from the corners of his senses, as if something had been allowed to escape the room and linger out here with him. He went on his way, reluctant to remain where any spoil from the ritual might fall.

‘We will begin again,’ Kreed said, marching through the lines of waiting supplicants. The test kill he had made was lying off to one side, discarded by one of the litanic helots, who stood over it, rocking back and forth. The servile had many mouths, all of them moving to form secret, noiseless words.

Four men kneeled to either side of him, each one of the eight marked with the octed across their bare chests. The skin and fat beneath had been carefully flayed away by a laser, so that the lines formed channels down which to guide the flow of blood.

Out on the floor of the chamber, the astropath Sahzë lay in a heap. She attempted to climb up to her knees. ‘I’m not ready,’ she wailed. ‘Please, lord. A moment.’ Her hands fluttered, white doves of pale fingers grasping at nothing.

‘Harox’s imposition gave you that and more,’ he snapped. ‘Don’t disappoint me now, mamzel. You promised so much. You’ll bestow it all.’

‘I will, but… the veil, the veil, the veil. I cannot see through it.’ She didn’t have the words beyond that, and she wept in pain.

‘I’ll give you what you need to burn through.’ Kreed nodded, considering it good. He didn’t spare the men on their knees a glance as he moved inside the arc of the sacrificial blades in his hands. The spin and cut was a remarkably light-footed motion for one as large as a gene-forged; it was almost elegant.

Four heads and four again lolled back from their shoulders, ripping away from necks which had become stumps, pillars of blood making brief fountains before falling in slicks across the desecrated mosaics in the floor.

Kreed pointed with the swords, guiding the motion of the pools of vitae like a conductor before an orchestra. He smiled. The Acolyte liked that metaphor: *an orchestra with a single instrument.*

The blood flowed and became a shallow wave. Sahzë screamed as it rose towards her face, up like a cobra to strike. The noise she made was choked as the fluid engulfed the astropath. It hung in the wet air around her, boiling and steaming. There had been such dedication in the eight dead crewmen. They were among the longest-serving ratings aboard the *Dark Page*, and in their life of attachment to this starship there was a bond that went beyond the corporeal. Kreed used that now, the force of their existence and the permanence of their souls chained to this vessel.

The litanic helots began a new silent chorus, and Kreed smelled burning meat. He had personally sewn the warp flask into Sahzë’s belly, tethering it there in an obscene and very deliberate echo of

motherhood. Her blood power and that of the dead men would peak in this ritual. Thus it was important to draw the octed correctly, or risk a catastrophic collapse of the sacrament.

The iron walls of the chamber and the starship beyond were dense with icons and glyphs from the Ruinous Powers, eyes of hell and myriad other devices looking inwards to hide all trace of sorcery from the psykers in thrall to the Blood Angels. If the rite were to fail, it would all be for nothing. The *Dark Page* would be consumed in a warp schism – and worse, their true intent would be revealed too soon to the sons of Sanguinius.

But then Sahzë did her trick, and Kreed was laughing. With a horrible, bass gurgle that never should have come from the throat of someone so delicate, the astropath ejected wreaths of smoky, blood-shot ectoplasm into the air. The foul mist gathered to itself, swirling into balls of acrid yellow vapour.

Gravitation inside the sacellum fluttered and Kreed staggered back a step or two. The smoke moved, congealed, gained colour and form.

'I see you, Word Bearer,' said Horus Lupercal's avatar. 'A sketch of your face, at least.' The Warmaster seemed disgusted. 'Speak now.'

'The jaws of the trap close on the Angel,' he said, bowing low. 'He does not know.'

'Don't presume to see into my brother's thoughts, Colchisian. Such arrogance makes a fool of you and burns my tolerance low.' Hard planes of annoyance resonated through the reeking chamber. 'Sanguinius could outwit you with a single breath. Underestimate him at your peril.'

Kreed pushed on. 'The scions of the Three Hundred companies are not of one mind as to what they have entered into. This disunity hides beneath obedience but it will be made clear and turned to our use when the axe falls.' His head bobbed. The stink of sulphur was growing strong, overpowering the odour of blood and metal. 'The fleet makes quarter-speed for Signus Prime and the core of the trap.'

Horus loomed, the haze-shape growing a cloak of ash as it shifted, passing over a still lake of arterial blood. 'You have not told me everything, Kreed. You are all so like Lorgar. Holding on to your secrets as though they were more precious than gold.'

The Acolyte stood his ground. 'Ask any question of me, Warmaster.'

'Russ sent legionaries to join the expeditionary fleet. You did not think that important enough to tell me?'

Despite himself, Kreed snorted. 'A handful of wolf-whelps, my lord? Grains of dust on the scales, nothing more.' He swallowed a poisonous breath. 'If it pleases Great Horus, I ask you to task me. What more may I do to make this grand turning come to pass?'

A low rumble sounded, and it took a moment for Kreed to realise it was the primarch's laughter. 'More arrogance. You hope to attain a greater role.' The smoke-face grew cold. 'You are nothing but a messenger, Tanus Kreed. A servile. Now be silent. I did not make this communion to speak to you.'

It was not the answer he had been expecting. *I don't understand* was what he wanted to say, but the cloying, overwhelming stench was now so great that it robbed Kreed of the ability to speak.

With a final, ululating shriek that cut into his soul, Sahzë burst. The Word Bearer turned to see her consumed by a torrent of witch-fires that burned with black flames, acid fog billowing from her pores that ate her flesh and made it into cinders. She crumbled away around the shimmering glass horror of the warp flask, which remained utterly untouched by her tormented death. The container rocked back and forth as if something within wanted its freedom. Kreed decided that he did not want to know what that was.

The communion should have broken immediately, but it did not. Horus – or what ghost-proxy there

was of him – was still present. Kreed's flesh crawled as a different energy filled the chamber: another power, something much greater, old and primal and hateful, was holding the conduit open. The Warmaster looked up, over the Word Bearer's shoulder, into the shadows above his head.

The dark up there was a mercy, he realised. It was protecting him, hiding the full sight of the monstrosity in there with them. Wings the colour of blood and fury were visible at the edges of the gloom, but Kreed could not look at them for long. He was a blinded man trying to see through a cataract, only here it was the universe itself repelling the sight. Opposed forces of reality and illusion, shimmering and lensing as they fought for supremacy.

Had *it* been there all along? Shrouded in some way, hiding behind a folded dimension? The possibility turned Kreed's gut to ice.

He could only hold parts of the great beast in his mind, segments of it that his psyche allowed him to perceive – and even then it was a hardship that drove the Acolyte to his knees. Kreed saw teeth as long as missiles, the tails of a whip thicker than anchor lines. The wings and the horns, chains made of souls petrified into iron links, bronze armour tempered in baths of molten flesh. Cloven hooves and jangling cascades of god-skulls.

His thoughts reeled with the effluent aura of this monster made of hate. The echoes of a million incidents of anger and bloodshed pulled at Kreed like a burning tide, the spillage of emotion running across the spectrum. The petty, selfish rage of a spoilt child; a victim's towering and impotent fear-fury; the lust of a deranged psychopath; the singular, mass-minded hate of an army unleashed. And these were only the discards of the creature, the footprints it left as it walked.

Kreed went to the floor, partly in pain, partly in hopes that he would not draw the attention of the creature, for instinct told him it could end him with a glance.

'Horus Lupercal,' said the daemon, teasing out the name with open relish. 'Samus sends his regards. And now the game begins.'

TEN

Hidden
Unholy Communion
Old Names

Five drop-ships put down on the harvest plains, landing nose to tail in a battle ring. Tactical squads from the 24th Company lay down the perimeter in moments, securing the small patch of Scoltrum's surface as a forward operating post. They set up guns and lines of attack fanning out in every direction.

It was the middle of the day on the agri-world, but much of the sunlight was swallowed up by the drifting black clouds of fire smoke that wreathed the sky. Colonial pict-records of the planet showed grain fields that went from horizon to horizon, flatlands of amber wheat-analogue broken only by the narrow spindles of bone-white wind turbine clusters. Those fields were alight now, smothered by advancing lines of orange flame that were visible from low orbit, moving slowly across the landscape as they were pushed by the planet's constant winds. Someone had set a torch to the farms and left them to burn.

Visibility on the ground was poor, so for the most part the Blood Angels relied on preysight and thermographics to navigate across the scorched wastes; but their objective was too large to be totally hidden by the smoke.

Before it had destroyed itself in a terminal fall towards the surface of the planet, the ship had been a frigate called the *Stark Dagger*, part of the Signus Cluster's outer defence squadron. It was not clear exactly what kind of mishap had befallen the vessel, but by the pattern of the debris dispersal, it was apparent the *Stark Dagger* had come in across the atmosphere at a low angle and broken apart as it crossed the line of interface. Ripping into three sections, the plough-shaped bow and the midships had carved muddy, ashen paths that ran kilometres long through the crop fields. The heavier stern was much further distant, lost in one of the shallow inland seas over the eastern horizon. Plumes of radiation from the cracked power cores of warp engines were visible as scintillating fountains of colour via rad-scan optics, showing like distant aurorae.

Saviour pods from the frigate had fired too late, and they peppered the long crash site of the ship, most of them buried in the harvest world's soft brown loam.

Captain Nakir sent squads out on jetbike chariots to conduct a survey of the escape capsules, but they reported in the same thing from each they found: many had deployed empty, the rest had mis-fired and killed whatever occupants they might have had on impact. Not one of the pods showed signs that those who fled the *Stark Dagger*'s destruction had survived.

The rest of the advance units moved on foot, breaking into a pair of formations to make for the two sites where the wreckage was most dense. Nakir himself led the group making for the bow section, and on the insistence of his fellow captain of the Ninth, he had brought men from Sergeant Cassiel's

squad along for their ‘perspective’.

Meros and Cassiel followed Madidus, Nakir’s second-in-command on the ground; the last time the Apothecary had seen the dour veteran was in the *Red Tear*’s airdock, as he examined the remains recovered by the crew of the *Numitor*. Kaide and Sarga were on the surface as well, temporarily posted to the other advance formation venturing to the midships remnant.

Meros felt very much an outsider among the men of the 24th. After their debriefing at the hands of Azkaellon, Berus and Raldoron, the legionaries who had been at Holst-Prime Hive were being treated differently by their battle-brothers. It was a subtle difference, to be sure, but Meros saw it.

They’ve heard the rumours of what we witnessed, he told himself, *and they think we’re either fools or madmen.*

It troubled the Apothecary to admit he had entertained the same thoughts about the scouts aboard the *Numitor*, when they had come back with talk of the strange and unusual among the wrecks surrounding the Signus Cluster. But they had not been mistaken. If anything, they had only glimpsed the edges of the impossibilities rife in this place.

He frowned. The whole fleet had seen the sign upon Phorus, and the crews of a handful of ships had been witness to the killing of Holst… And yet no one had answers that could fit the facts. There were only more questions.

One of Madidus’s warriors, a severe hulk of a man called Gravato who carried a meltagun, was watching him with a questioning gaze. ‘Brother-medicae,’ he called, and Meros knew before he said any more what he was going to ask. ‘Is it true what I hear? That the xenos attacked you with scrap iron in the upper city?’ There was an edge of challenge in the words, even shading towards mockery.

‘At first.’ He saw no reason to be less than honest. ‘They killed two legionaries in as many seconds. Then, they…’ He faltered, trying to find words that didn’t sound fanciful. ‘I do not believe they were robotic proxies. I do not…’ Once more, words failed him, and he glanced towards Cassiel. The sergeant gave a slight shake of the head.

Gravato gave a soft, sneering grunt, sharing a look with his squad mates. He raised his weapon. ‘Show me them. I’ll put an end to such tactics.’

Meros’s temper flared. ‘I hope it will be that easy.’ The grim, cold-eyed conviction in his reply smothered any further possibility of scorn in an instant. He wanted to say aloud that what they had faced on Holst smacked more of myth and magick than weapons born of reason, but to utter those words would make Gravato and the rest of Nakir’s men doubt his sanity.

And they would have good cause. His thoughts turned to Kano; he had not seen his friend since they returned to the fleet, and they had barely spoken on the flight back from the ice world. At this moment, Meros would have welcomed his comrade’s counsel.

‘Look sharp,’ said the captain, as a giant harpoon-shape hove out of the smoke above their heads. As they approached, it revealed itself as the tip of the frigate’s prow, sweeping away into the blade-like planes of the armoured fore-sections. The massive segment of wreckage was inverted, the dorsal surface disappearing behind a thick bolus of churned earth that had been compressed by its passage across the fields. All around them pieces of hull metal lay in fragments, shorn off in the crash. Here and there fires burned in ponds of spilled promethium.

Sergeant Madidus halted abruptly, raising his fist. ‘Do you hear?’ he said.

The warriors fell silent. Meros thought he caught a faint noise, like the sound of static on a dead vox-channel. It was inconstant, rising and falling at the edge of his hearing.

Captain Nakir advanced slowly towards the hull of the *Stark Dagger*. The plasteel plates of the fuselage were stained with a layer of what appeared to be black ash. It glittered faintly in the feeble daylight.

Without warning, Nakir raised his gauntlet and struck the hull with his fist, hard enough to sound like a gunshot. The static-noise suddenly became a ripping buzz-saw chorus, and what Meros had thought was ash suddenly exploded away into the air, swirling around.

'Flies,' said Madidus. 'A swarm of them.'

The insects made an angry, snarling drone as they rose and contorted into a dark cloud. For a moment, they dithered over the Blood Angels, as if they were considering them; then the swarm coiled away, deeper into the wreckage.

'Some kind of local insect pest,' offered Nakir. 'The fires must have attracted them.' He beckoned the rest of the legionaries to follow him. 'Come, this way.' The captain pointed up the slope of the fallen hull to an impact crater. 'We'll make our entry there. Once inside, sweep for any working cogitator consoles, log records…'

'Survivors?' said Meros.

'Survivors,' repeated Nakir, although his tone was doubtful.

Using cables and the mag-locks in their boots, the Blood Angels climbed aboard the *Stark Dagger*, emerging in a long, low arming chamber beneath the frigate's torpedo bays. They broke into ten-man teams, and set off into the wreck's infrastructure, using the pin-lamps on their bolters to guide the way.

Meros activated the illuminator on his backpack and illuminated the path for Madidus, who took point with Nakir a step behind. Cassiel stayed close. The veteran had said very little since they left the *Red Tear*, and he eyed each heap of wreckage they passed with a glower, as if he expected it to rise up and attack them at any moment.

The passage into the grounded frigate was slow and careful. They had no deckplates to walk upon; with the wreck upside down, the ceiling became their floor, forcing them to pick their way over arches and decorative crenellations. Meros's bio-implants rendered any possibility of disorientation moot, but still it remained a tricky descent.

Madidus found bodies soon enough, but they were burned to a crisp, blackened shapes resembling human beings but with little other definition to them. One of the other legionaries reached out to touch one of the dead and the corpse-form immediately broke apart like poorly-fired clay. Pausing a moment, Meros offered his auspex to the remains, but the readings gathered by the sensing device shed no light on the exact manner of death.

They moved on, past the weapons decks to the service tiers. The wreck of the *Stark Dagger* was not still in its repose. All around them, the bulkheads creaked and moaned, either from the passage of wind through gashes in the hull or the slow settling of the starship's dead weight. Rains of rust flakes fell like snow, glittering as the beam of the flood lamp caught them. Vessels like the frigate were never designed to operate inside a gravity well, and their own mass pulled against them. Given time, sections of the wreck would eventually collapse under their own weight. High over their heads, metal scraped on metal, and Meros fancied it was the noise of bared talons against the twisted plasteel.

Every ten minutes, the vox muttered with the voices of the other teams checking in. They too had found the burned dead, along with more colonies of the strange black flies.

An alert icon blinked in the corner of the Apothecary's vision block and he halted, bringing up his gauntlet's auspex again.

'You have something?' said Cassiel.

He nodded slowly. 'Yes, captain. A change in gas concentrations nearby.'

Nakir hefted his boltgun. 'Toxins?'

Meros shook his head. 'No, sir. But a marked rise in carbon dioxide and other by-products of respiration.' He panned the sensor head around, letting it sample the air. 'Something is alive nearby.'

'Weapons to ready,' he ordered. The commander's face was unreadable as his men brought up their guns and snapped off safety catches. Carefully, he tabbed the vox-pickup in his gorget and spoke into it. His words were immediately amplified tenfold by an address relay in the helmet hanging at his waist. 'Attention. This is Captain Dar Nakir of the IX Legion Astartes.' His call rebounded off the walls and down the dark corridors. 'Anyone within the sound of my voice, make yourself known. We are here to rescue you. You will not be harmed.'

The last word echoed away from them, fading, and Meros held his breath, straining to listen.

Up above, very distinctly, something heavy struck the bulkhead three times.

'There.' Gravato pointed towards a hatch in the wall beneath a twisted gantry.

Nakir arranged his men in a staggered formation to cover all angles in the event of an ambush, and then climbed up, with Meros and the others following closely. The hatch was a thick autolock, the kind that would automatically seal shut in the event of catastrophic loss of atmosphere, but as the captain looked closer, he picked out thermal damage around the release clamps. 'These handles have been welded in place. From the inside.'

'They didn't want anyone coming in after them,' noted Cassiel.

Meros held up the auspex, the green glow of the display backlighting his face. 'Confirmed, my lord. Someone is in there.'

Nakir stepped back, shooting a look at Gravato. 'Get it open.'

'Aye,' he replied, raising the melta weapon with one hand, dialling down the projector choke with the other.

'Wait!' Meros stepped into the firing line. 'We don't know who is on the other side of this. The shock effect could be lethal.'

'You have another suggestion, Apothecary?'

'I do.' Meros drew his chainaxe and threw a hard blow against the first of the clamps. Fractal-edged tungsten-alloy teeth met plasteel and yellow sparks flew. The handle spun away from its mounts, and in moments Meros had beheaded all of the clamps. Cassiel put his weight behind the hinges, and with a shout of tortured metal, the hatch swung back.

It revealed a dark, wide space beyond, thick with human odours and stale atmosphere. Meros stepped over the threshold, the lamp over his shoulder bringing hard illumination to the gloom. It was hazy inside – and something else.

The air in the chamber seemed strangely *dead*. It was almost as if a shroud had been placed over everything, muffling sounds and sensations even though nothing seemed quieter or less defined. He thought he could smell ozone.

Bare feet slapped against metal and a slight, limping figure fell into the cone of the beam. Utterly out of place in the plasteel dungeon, the woman wore a fine sundress that was now much the worse for wear, with a short jacket draped over thin shoulders. Her face was pale and grubby beneath an

unkempt knot of red hair. She had an expression that was somewhere between the poles of awe and relief.

A long-fingered hand dared to came up and touch the sigil of the *alatus cadere* across Meros's chestplate, and a smile like sunrise split her smoke-dirty face. 'You are the Emperor's Angels,' she breathed.

'We are,' he replied.

'I knew you would come for us.' She spun on her heel and shouted into the shadows. 'I told you they would come!'

From the edges of the darkness, more survivors dared to show themselves, one by one coming forwards to see the Blood Angels, as if they wanted proof that this was not an illusion.

Kreed had given his understanding when the Urizen had demanded it. He had never questioned; that was not the way of the Word Bearers. They were built, soul and bone, upon a certainty of purpose that was ultimate and unbreakable.

Our blood is our oath.

Those words were said in the years before the Enlightenment, back in the wastes of Colchis when the enemy were cruel priests and heartless lore-lords. They were spoken again when the Emperor came in his false glory. Now they were uttered in real, total truth for the first time, and it was a renewal. The Legion was born again under Lorgar's revelations and it was, at last, *right*.

The other, older truths, now revealed in the light of the new as mere husks, had been sloughed off as a snake would shed a desiccated skin. Those ghost-truths were not mistakes, but tests. The XVII Legion had been tested and found good.

How could it be otherwise? The Word Bearers had broken down the barriers and at last ascended to the path of the real truth. The great road was revealed.

Tanus Kreed believed this with all his heart. Doubt was unknown to him. If his Legion had failed to comprehend, if his master had not *seen* and brought them illumination… then they would have been forever trapped in false dogma. For a moment he thought of the Ultramarines who would perish on far distant Calth, the hidebound Imperial Fists, whose days were similarly numbered; the Salamanders and the Raven Guard ground into dust beneath the boot heel of the new order.

None of them saw as the Word Bearers saw. None of them saw what Kreed laid eyes upon now.

A being made of nightmares and war, too terrible for paltry words to encompass.

It spared him an arch look and he recoiled, his flesh searing. The Acolyte brought up his hands to shield his face and felt them burn cold. Kreed's eyes prickled as if a thousand needles stabbed through them into his skull. Each time he tried to gain some understanding of the massive, bestial form, the scale of it slipped away from him. It filled the room, and yet it seemed even larger than that. The iron walls surrounding them, decorated with layers of profane iconography, took on new, impermanent dimensions. Reality seemed to distort around the towering behemoth. All around the chamber, the litanic servitors were dropping dead where they stood, multiple mouths open in voiceless screams.

At last the monster turned away, and mercifully Kreed was – for the moment – once again beneath its notice.

Across the sacellum, the Warmaster's ghostly avatar gave a nod to the winged creature. 'What are you?' The question flashed across the void, buzzing with malice.

‘Names are for cenotaphs,’ it rumbled, drooling black venom through gaping jaws. The creature gave an exaggerated bow, the blurred mass of it making a mockery of so very human a gesture. ‘Know that I am a Warlord of the Damned, Arbiter of Unmercy. I am your general upon the field of battle for this great conflict, Horus Lupercal.’ It chuckled and gave a mocking salute in the oldest of ways, flicking a clawed hand from its savage brow. ‘I know you yearn to call me *daemon*. That word fits well. I’ll skin it and wear it about my girth.’ It rocked back and forth on taloned feet, exuding a sense of incredible fury held barely in check. The massive creature was almost squirming with the need to commit violence, and Kreed dared to wonder what it could do given unfettered release.

Above the shivering mass of the warp flask upon the bloody deck, Horus’s face hazed and reformed in a scowl. ‘If you are a mere general, then where is your commander-in-chief?’

There was a barb there and the beast reacted to it, chains about its arms rattling in annoyance. ‘It is… indisposed. Much is to be done, I am told. Final preparations.’ The daemon shrugged, as if the thought of such a thing disgusted it. ‘The work of the hesitant and timid witch-minds disgusts me.’ It leered. ‘I came for blood and skulls.’

‘You’ll have them, enough to slake your thirst and more,’ Horus promised. ‘If you do as *I* command you now.’

Kreed sensed the undercurrent beneath the Warmaster’s words, and he felt a flutter of panic in his hearts. The scope of this great turning, the complex and perfect design of the betrayal at Signus had been planned with exacting focus and absolute precision by the hand of Erebus and his ethereal cohorts.

It could not be changed, not at the eleventh hour.

Not even by Horus Lupercal, the fulcrum of the war to end all wars.

The Acolyte dared to stand, taking a step towards the smoke-phantom that carried the Warmaster’s presence. ‘My lord,’ he began. ‘What do you intend?’

The daemon made a motion with the smallest of its claws, less than a gesture; still, it was enough to make Tanus Kreed’s lungs and throat fill with tainted bile. The gooey, purple-black ooze gushed out from his lips and nostrils, drowning him as he stood there. He swayed, the agony shocking him rigid, yet somehow, he was not dead, even as the oil-thick fluid refused to expel itself from his body. Kreed crashed down to the scarred mosaic floor and lay there, shivering.

‘My thirst is great,’ said the beast, its grin growing to terrifying width. ‘And my tastes are refined.’ A wicked tongue flicked out, tasting the air. ‘Mortals are common and good.’ It nodded towards Kreed. ‘I look forward to sampling these gene-forged.’

‘I will give you a primarch’s blood, an angel’s skull,’ said the Warmaster. ‘Is that a prize that will sway your full loyalty to me in this?’

A great, quaking churn of laughter beat at the walls. ‘Samus was right. For an ephemeral, you are very clever, Horus Lupercal. You have my measure.’ The laugh ground the air with its passing once more. ‘A brother’s essence, made sweet with despair and sorrow–’

‘And hate,’ Horus broke in. ‘There will be such hate.’

‘I want that. I will gorge on it,’ the daemon growled. ‘Give it to me. Tell me how.’

At last, the pain ebbed and Kreed could breathe again. His flesh was hot and filmed with sweat as his bio-implants worked feverishly to rid his body of the toxins that had briefly flooded it. Still, he was able to force out a few words. ‘Sanguinius… The plan…’

Horus’s avatar merged into a newer, more savage expression. ‘Erebus’s plan. Their plan.’ He shook

his head. ‘Not mine.’

Moment by shuddering moment, Kreed rose to his knees and then to his feet, blinking bloody tears from his eyes, spitting gobs of ejecta to the deck. ‘We… agreed. This place, this colossal trap… The entire purpose of it was to contain the Blood Angels, to push them to the abyss. To bring them to our banner or destroy them!’

The daemon’s horned head bobbed. ‘I can smell it on them. They do not see it, but the scarlet path passes beneath their feet. The correct application of pressure and they would turn fully to it, marching to the Skull Throne. The bleak, red release is in them all. The little Angel knows it, even though he lacks the words. It is the only thing he truly fears.’

‘Yes,’ said Horus. ‘I gave you the key to them. Use it. Strip away their dutiful nobility and virtue. Break them and bring me what is left. Make weapons of them for my crusade.’

Kreed tried to imagine that: the fury of the Blood Angels with no control, nothing to hold them back. No code, no morality, nothing but rage. They would become mindless killing machines, fit only to be cast down upon the enemy to destroy everything they saw until all was ashes. To take the Angel’s proud sons and remake them as blood-hungry berserkers would be a desecration of such magnificent power… But the breaking of Sanguinius himself would be the greatest challenge of them all.

The Warmaster seemed to sense his thoughts, even across the light years. ‘Aye,’ he said. ‘I want the Blood Angels for the crusade against my father, so he can see his folly, so the Imperium can know that even the most noble can be corrupted. But not my dear brother.’

A low rumble of amusement issued out from the daemon’s fanged mouth. ‘Ah. A detail becomes apparent.’

Old, buried venom emerged in Horus’s words. ‘Sanguinius will never turn his face from the Emperor. Erebus is a fool to think it could ever be so. The Angel must fall and never rise. Without him, his sons will embrace your scarlet path, creature. They will be lost.’ His eyes became hooded. ‘They will belong to your bloody king.’

‘I see clearly,’ said the beast, drawing in its great wings. ‘Your hubris is entertaining, Horus Lupercal. I see what you see. If the impossible were to happen, if the Angel Sanguinius *could* be turned… Then for the first time you would have a true rival among your traitor allies. Perhaps, one the Ruinous Powers might grow to favour over you, given time. You do not wish to take that risk.’

‘*He will not turn!*’ Horus’s shout shredded the smoke-shape of the avatar, and it twisted angrily as it reformed. ‘None of you understand him as well as I do. But mark this, he *will* die even if I must do the deed myself. On my soul, I swear it.’

‘It will be as you say.’ The daemon brought its clawed hands together, talons scraping across one another. ‘And I accept my part in this.’ Hellish eyes, burning red like murdered stars, turned to fix Tanus Kreed in their sight. An expectant silence fell.

The Acolyte was not a fool. ‘I accept my part in this,’ he echoed, quashing all hesitation. He would consider his collusion in the defiance of Erebus’s orders later. If he lived long enough to do so.

Kreed bowed his head and closed his eyes, listening to the echo of monstrous laughter, the stink of blood and sulphur all around him.

When at last he dared open them again, he was alone with the meat of the dead.

Meros passed from one ragged survivor to the next, giving them a cursory examination, documenting their injuries with growing concern. There were thirty-two in total, twenty males and twelve females,

whose ages ranged from a boy of approximately three to a woman of one hundred and six standard Terran years. All of them were severely dehydrated and malnourished, with two of them close to death and several more with minor wounds.

He grimaced at nothing. The chamber made him feel uncomfortable in a manner that reached to his marrow. There was a hollow, sepulchral atmosphere to the room, like the depths of an ancient tomb best left to the lifeless. Meros sensed the ghost of a void out at the edges of his thoughts, a wrongness that he couldn't shake off. He sighed and pushed it away, trying to focus.

Captain Nakir and Sergeant Madidus were close by, towering over the humans. The tattered refugees huddled together in a loose group, their fear apparent in every motion of their hands, every furtive look from their eyes. Meros learned that the woman in the dress had the name Tillyan Niobe, and she had been the caretaker of an unimportant ornamental garden in a town on the outskirts of Landing, Signus Prime's capital. At first she talked at him rather than to him, as if it was a matter of great importance that she give him as much data about herself as she could in as short a time. It was almost as if she wanted to prove to him that she was what she said she was. Almost as if she was trying to fix herself in the real.

'Can we go home now?' she asked. 'Have you defeated them?'

'The nephilim?'

Niobe hesitated. 'I… I don't know that word.' She swallowed. 'We've been in here for weeks. We have not seen light of day since the crash.'

'What happened to the ship?' said Nakir. He pointed at a man who had identified himself as Lieutenant Dortmund, formerly of the Signusi infantry brigades. 'You. Explain it to me.'

Dortmund peered up from beneath a mess of blond hair. He seemed too young to be wearing an officer's braid. 'It's hard to say, lord,' he began, fingering the lasgun slung at his hip. 'We were below decks for most of the flight from Signus Prime. The ship was trying to move beyond the mass shadow. We did not see much.' Dortmund nodded at another man in a crewman's oversuit. 'Mister Zhomas here, he was one of the *Stark Dagger*'s enlisted ranks.'

'I know less than you think,' Zhomas insisted. He was a thin, old man with an acidic manner, and he clearly resented the lieutenant's attempt to bring him to the attention of the legionaries. 'She was overloaded, captain. We were making good speed, but pushing the reactor too hard. Much too hard. I know there was power loss and we... we started to drift. That's when the beasts came upon us.'

'You were attacked by nephilim ships,' said Nakir. 'Did the xenos board this vessel?'

'You keep saying that word!' A man in a black greatcoat who hovered at the edge of the group spoke up, as if he were no longer able to keep his silence. 'What does it mean? *Neff-what*?' He spat on the deck.

'Who are you?' said Madidus.

'You can call me Hengist, Space Marine. And that's all for now.'

'Indeed?' The sergeant stepped forwards. 'Why don't you tell us what you know, Hengist?'

The man tried and failed to stand his ground, shrinking back at the approach of the Blood Angel. Meros suspected he was a criminal of some sort. When they had first entered the chamber, Hengist had made an attempt to conceal a short sword and a narrow-gauge bolt pistol beneath a pile of rags; he'd not been pleased when the Apothecary took them from him.

'I know what came out there weren't no alien.' Hengist showed his teeth. 'Aliens don't make walls bleed nor mothers eat their children, don't turn sky to glass and men into cold smoke…' There was

something vicious about how he retorted.

'He's right,' Zhomas added, with a jerk. 'I've seen greenskins and the fey ones in my service, never nothing like that what killed this ship. All things made out of fangs and wings, lord. Horrors that you can't lay eyes upon too long.' He made motions with his fingers, little stabbing gestures. 'Punched in through the hull, like snakes. Fires and all.' He gave an involuntary shudder. 'Down we go.'

'The ship started to break up,' offered Niobe. She looked towards Zhomas. 'We went through the atmosphere.'

The crewman nodded, his eyes wet with sorrow, staring into nothing. 'Oh aye.'

She went on. 'We all… found each other after the crash. Came in here and locked the door. We had food and water.'

Meros saw where racks of supplies had been piled. Most of the containers were empty. 'What were you going to do when you ran out?'

'Die?' Dortmund wondered aloud. 'We couldn't leave. Not after what we heard through the doors.'

'Killings.' Hengist's head bobbed. 'Killings the like of which never came afore.' He raised his hands and pressed them to his head. 'The sounds of *that* never fade.'

'But the…' Nakir hesitated. 'The *enemy* that attacked the frigate. They left you alone.'

'We're not the only ones!' Dortmund said it like it was a foolish suggestion. 'I mean, we can't be.' His face fell. 'The only ones on the ship?'

'You are the first we have encountered since our fleet entered the Signus Cluster,' Madidus replied, matter-of-fact. 'Phorus, Holst, all dead. No signs of life on this world or any indications of it on the inner planets.'

A palpable sense of shock spread through the civilians, and Nakir went on. 'Why would they allow you to live?'

The captain's inference hung in the dead air. None of the survivors showed any mark of the xenos, no evidence of the masking the nephilim used on their helots, but still he was reluctant to evacuate them to the fleet without further information.

'Because…' A woman's voice, thin and laced with pain, came from a figure lying along a low bench. 'Because it amuses them to watch us die slowly in our despair.'

'Lady Rozin, you must rest.' Dortmund went to her side, frowning. 'Don't fear. We're safe now.'

'We are *not*,' the woman insisted, rising painfully to a sitting position. Meros noted that she wore the status brooch of a colonial political aide on a blackened, blood-streaked jacket. 'The Legions have not liberated us. They'll never do that.'

'No,' Hengist shouted at her, 'because you brought those monsters here, didn't you? Invited them in, like, with tisane and garlands of flowers!'

'Be quiet,' Madidus snapped. 'You had your chance to speak.'

'What does he mean?' said Meros.

Rozin looked up at him, and she had eyes that belonged to a broken spirit. He had seen it before, in warriors who had lived too long at the pinnacle of bloodshed and death. Whatever she had witnessed had aged her decades without taking a day from her flesh. 'Bruja came to us.' It cost her just to utter the name aloud. 'He was brimming with lies. We thought he was the solution but he was the root.'

Niobe placed a hand on Meros's vambrace. 'He said he was going to save us. His voice rang through every watch-wire across the cluster. But he turned us on ourselves.'

'Our weakness and our fear were all he needed. By the end of the first week we were building

concentration camps for the ones who dared disagree.' Tears fell from Rozin's eyes, but she did not seem to notice them, her expression blank. 'Within a month Bruja was ruler of the system in all but name. He told us if we appeased the forces that assailed us, we would live.'

'What forces?' said Meros.

Niobe met his gaze, confusion in her expression. 'The daemons,' she said, as if the answer were obvious.

The dull, leaden silence that followed was broken by a crackle across the vox-link. One of Nakir's men in the other formation was reporting, several minutes before the scheduled check-in. The legionary's voice was thick with static and peculiar resonance effects that sounded like distant whispers – but what was utterly distinct was the crash of bolter-fire in the background.

'Withdrawing to landing zone,' came the message. 'staging point is under attack. We have intermittent enemy contact.' Before Nakir could demand further explanation, a droning buzz filled the channel and the signal ceased abruptly.

'They've come back,' Hengist hissed, a gallows grin on his lips, almost as if he was pleased to be proven right. 'Your legionaries drew them in anew!'

Meros looked up and met Cassiel's gaze. The veteran's expression was grim and determined.

'Orders?' said Madidus.

Nakir gathered up his helm and secured it in place, the vox-filter darkening his tones. 'Take Meros, Cassiel and Gravato, bring the survivors. The rest of the squad will come with me, we'll make a sprint to the staging point.'

'Aye, lord.' The sergeant saluted.

The captain hefted his weapon and barked out a new command. 'To arms! Take the pace!' In a blur of red armour, the legionaries thundered from the chamber, vanishing back the way they had come.

'You heard him,' said Cassiel, scanning the faces of the civilians. 'On your feet. Carry the ones that cannot walk or they'll be left behind.'

'Blood Angel!' Niobe's hand pulled on Meros's arm, panic filling her. 'You don't understand, we can't go out there–'

'Stay close. We will protect you.'

'You believe that now,' she said, shaking her head, 'but you are wrong.'

At the staging point, the legionaries on guard had thought at first it was a gale of wind bringing new plumes of black smoke from the fires, pushing it across the ruined landscape towards them.

Then one of the warriors noted that the clouds were moving against the direction of the rest of the smoke. They heard the buzzing, the low drone building quickly to such noise that it was hard to make one's voice heard below a shout.

The fat, ebon flies came in a swarm thick enough to eclipse what remained of the sunlight. Blood Angels who had gone unhooded went for their helms as the insects fell upon them like a tidal wave. Some were too slow and collapsed clawing at the exposed portions of their skin. The flies bored into bare flesh with acidic mandibles, eating their way into the unwary. The mass choked the breather grilles of their battle plate and the intake vents of the Stormbirds. Thick mats of hissing insect bodies filled thruster bells and choked the engines' fire, grounding the ships.

Then there were faces in the fire smoke, the suggestion of lithe, graceful forms dancing around just out of clear sight. Pink, naked flesh and sinuous curves, laughing eyes that mocked the warriors in

crimson. Savage claws that snapped and clattered together in raucous chorus. The air shimmered as if it had been cast like a glamour out of ancient myth.

By the time Captain Nakir reached the landing zone, the Blood Angels were in the teeth of the attack. He opened fire, placing his trust in bolt shell and blade's edge.

Meros and the others could only move as swiftly as the slowest members of the ragged group of survivors, and their advance became a drawn-out struggle. Madidus took the lead, and they travelled in bursts. First through the winding, broken corridors of the *Stark Dagger*, then threading out through the dispersal field of wreckage and spoil. Now they were on open ground, with only the occasional low rise and the wreaths of heavy, choking smoke to give them cover.

Madidus raised his fist in the air and they went to the ground; some of the civilians had reacted too slowly the first time the sergeant had made the gesture, but Cassiel had shouted them into obedience and now no one dared to linger off the mark.

'What is it?' said Gravato over the vox, from the middle of the group. From his place at the tail end of the party, the Apothecary could see the Blood Angel pull his meltagun to his shoulder.

'Overhead,' said Madidus. 'I hear… wings.'

Meros strained to listen and caught a fraction of the noise. The dull thump of air over beating, leathery sails; the strange skirling cry of something that was no common avian creature. He looked up, but all he saw were shadows moving above the smoke clouds, fast and flowing.

Part of him wanted very much to sight in and take a shot at those vague shapes, just for the certainty of being able to see what forms lurked out in this wasteland. But a single bolt-shot would alert the enemy to their presence, and the lives of the people they had come to rescue could not be put at risk.

He looked down and saw Niobe watching him. Her plain face had kind eyes that implored him. She seemed so small and feeble, so incapable of strength. That she and the others had lived this long was miraculous to him.

The galaxy is a harsh and pitiless place, he thought. *That is why the Emperor created us, to tame it for people like her*. It was important to remember such things; in the long conflict of the Great Crusade it was sometimes easy to forget that the galaxy was not only a place of war.

Niobe's eyes flicked to a point over Meros's shoulder and he saw the colour drain from her cheeks. Her mouth dropped open in horror. Slowly and carefully he turned, silently drawing his bolt pistol.

It was three hundred metres from where they crouched, pausing to sniff at the air, licking at nothing with a forked, serpentine tongue. The dimensions of the creature and the svelte curves of its body suggested femininity, but only as an afterthought, only as a dressing for its true nature. Humanoid after a fashion, the thing was a very pale pink, almost corpse-white in places, and it balanced coyly on thin, muscular legs that ended in taloned feet. A face like mis-sculpted marble with feline eyes, no nose and a lipless sneer of a mouth turned this way and that. Meros saw striated elfin ears like those of the eldar, but the female bore no kinship to that species. He knew that instinctively; aliens Meros had encountered on many occasions, and although they were repulsive to him, no xenos he had seen carried this same sense of *wrongness* about it.

'Contact right,' he whispered into the vox, becoming an armoured statue. 'Single target on foot. Could be a scout.'

'Can you make a silent kill?' Madidus replied.

'Negative, too far. No reaction as yet.'

‘Don’t risk the humans. Let it go if you can.’

‘Aye.’

There was a pause and then Madidus spoke again. ‘Can you identify it?’

‘It’s not nephilim, sergeant. I don’t know *what* it is.’

‘Succubae,’ whispered Niobe. ‘Daemonette. Seducer. Those are the old names for them. They came in Bruja’s wake.’

The creature toyed with a blade in one pale hand, rolling it in idle circles. Its other arm ended in something resembling the pincer of a giant arthropod, toothed chelae tapping quietly against one another. The legionary could not be certain if the claw was some kind of weapon or if it was actually part of the female itself.

As that question formed in his mind, the black, pupil-less eyes turned and looked right at him.

There was no way it could have failed to see them. Even in a low crouch, the crimson and white of Meros’s battle plate stood out against the churned dirt of the plainsland.

But then it turned, with no hint of understanding on its face, and vanished into the smoke with a low, trilling call.

ELEVEN

Daemons
Signus Prime
The Scream

Madidus brought the survivors to the staging point, threading through the safe corridor. They were almost to the Stormbirds when Gravato reported that the count was short. Meros realised that Hengist and the man he had been carrying, a wounded farmer by the name of Quan, had fallen far behind. He went back for them.

Quan was in a heap a short distance from the perimeter and Hengist was angrily trying to pull him to his feet. When Meros was two paces from the injured man, the creature, the thing that Niobe had called a *daemonette*, attacked.

Hengist ran screaming as the succubae fell out of the air, dropping from the back of some winged mount-beast to run Quan through with its great claw. The farmer died quickly, but not easily; he gave no resistance to the thing. Instead, Quan lost himself in the creature's opalescent gaze even as it gutted him alive.

The daemonette's mount, a grotesque lizard-bird with four wings and a mouth full of cilia, wheeled and dived at the Blood Angel, instinctively blocking the line of fire to its rider as he drew his bolt pistol. Drawn off mark, he brought down the winged monster with a head-shot. Fountaining pink fluids, the mount crashed into the mud and lay there, foaming and twitching in the throes of death.

The succubae cried, a strangled, bloodcurdling sound, and came at him in fury. Meros tried to kill the beast with bolt-fire, but she – if considerations of gender could be applied to such a being – was fleet of foot, and on him before he could reload.

The flat of the succubae's blade-claw hit him with such force that Meros's helmed head stuck the bulky ridge of his backpack and he saw stars. The Blood Angel rolled and came up with his chainaxe, swinging in a blind arc that roared through the space where the creature had been standing.

She blurred away, dodging the clumsy reflex blow, making play at a cocky parry with the obsidian dagger in her other hand. The creature made a noise of almost sexual pleasure, pantomiming a demure expression that was odd and disturbing on the sharp planes of her face. Then she attacked him, shrieking.

Meros came in with the axe's backswing and connected hard, the flat of the weapon slamming into the succubae's breast, knocking her into a stumble. Agile as she was, the creature turned the fall into a roll and sprang into readiness once more. Meros turned, keeping her before him, waiting for the next attack.

He shut out all the distractions, the crashing thunder of gunfire, the buzzing swarm-screams, the deafening chaos of battle unfolding all around the grounded Stormbirds. His battle-brothers had engaged the enemy, and doubtless each of them was matched in his own small war just as the

Apothecary was now. A single moment's inattention could be fatal against such a foe.

From her low stance, the creature sprang at him, powerful taloned legs launching her at him with new speed. Meros turned his shoulder into the assault and leaned into the motion. They collided with bone-shaking force and he heard the crackle of ceramite as the outer layer of his armour was nicked. The claw-hand swept at him and he slammed it down with the butt of his pistol. Bony, chitinous material fragmented and the succubae spat angrily, a cascade of noises that seemed like words, but not from any language fit for a human tongue. He glimpsed a flash of bleeding meat inside the cracked claw; it was not, as he had wondered before, a sleeve-weapon, but actually a mutant outgrowth of the female's slim, fleshy arm. The small, abhorrent truth of this detail sickened him. What kind of monstrous evolution would create such a twisted creature as this one?

The black dagger plunged to his chest and struck at a poor angle, scraping across the curve of his armoured torso, failing to penetrate. Meros made a split-second choice and released his bolt pistol, letting it drop into the scorched mud at his feet.

With one hand now freed, he grabbed at the claw's wrist and forced it forwards in a sharp jerk of motion. The daemonette was caught off-guard and the curve of her great pincer slapped hard across her face, drawing streaks of oily purple blood.

Meros followed through, shoving the creature back before she could regain balance and break off. He turned the chainaxe's head in his hand and brought it up, squeezing the trigger bar in the grip. The spinning blades bit into the bare skin of the creature's midriff and tore through. With all his strength behind him, the Apothecary lifted the daemonette off the ground and into the air.

She screamed and ripped at him, knowing death was upon her, and the unearthly beauty of her strange aspect suddenly turned into a portrait of something hellish and filled with hate. The depthless opal eyes that had captured Quan's will burned white, and the scream cut out with a dry gasp.

He flung the corpse to the ground and stooped to take up his discarded pistol.

Hengist, who had been cowering nearby for the duration of the fight, staggered to his feet, unable to look away from the carcass of the creature. He pointed at it. 'I told them,' he spat, as if he were accusing someone of a great crime. 'I told them.'

'Follow,' Meros barked, reloading as he went. 'Tarry again and I leave you here.'

The cough and grunt of flamers met them as they passed beneath the wing of the nearest Stormbird. Nakir's men were tracing ropes of flame over the fly-clogged exhausts, burning the foul insects off in droves and forcing the swarms to scatter. It was better to risk minor damage to the Legion's own ships, Meros considered, than remain grounded on Scoltrum's surface.

Dead succubae and lizard-birds lay all around, and with them a number of warriors in red armour. Meros cursed under his breath to see even a single Blood Angel dead at the hands of these grotesque harpies.

He looked away and saw Madidus at the stern hatch of a waiting drop-ship. Niobe's face was also visible inside, peering out at him. The sergeant beckoned; they would not wait for a second wave to come after them. The beacon that had called to the Blood Angels had been found and silenced. There was no reason to remain on the agri-world any more.

Hengist was at his side. 'Can we go now? I want to get away from here.'

The open terror in the man's voice made Meros angry. 'Get away from me,' he said, moving to the nearest fallen legionary. 'I have a duty to perform first.'

He activated the reductor probe on his medicae gauntlet, and with solemn care, Meros began to

harvest the progenoid glands of the dead.

The mood in the lithocast chamber was in stark contrast to the temper of the conclave only a few days earlier. Captain Raldoron folded his arms across his chest and scanned the room, picking out the avatars of the commanders who were transmitting from their ships. Along with countless other minor malfunctions and small indignities, the hololithic network between the vessels of the Blood Angels fleet was suffering intermittent loss of data parity, and the synthetic avatars of many of the Three Hundred's company captains were blurry and crazed with static. Techmarines and servitors from the *Red Tear*'s Mechanicum enginseer brigades had been unable to correct the problem, or blot out the damnable interference whisper that had gradually made itself known on every vox-channel and tactical relay.

The temper of the room was grim, and the presence of the Great Angel did little to lighten it. Officers of good and level bearing were showing signs of irritation and division. These warriors had gathered expecting to fight a definitive battle of the Great Crusade, to end a threat to humankind, but what they had found at Signus Prime continued to defy categorisation.

Captain Nakir completed his report to the assemblage and there was obvious dissent, even towards the battle-brother's unembellished description of the enemy engagement on the fifth planet.

'These creatures...' began High Warden Berus, sharing an arch look with his subordinate Annellus, who stood nearby. 'Did you think to bring a dead one back to the fleet so that it might be examined in the apothecarion?'

Nakir's lips thinned. 'Of course,' he snapped. 'But the corpses denatured on the way back to our vessel.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Zuriel, from the cohort of the Sanguinary Guard.

Nakir glanced at the legionary standing beside him, a line Apothecary from the Ninth Company. 'It melted, Guard Sergeant. Like ice upon a griddle. All that remained was a foul, toxic residue that could not be analysed.'

'The survivors, then,' said Captain Amit, his gaze steady and intense. 'They live still? They were examined?'

'Aye, brother-captain. The group are being held under guard in a secure compartment on the lower decks.' Again, Nakir looked at the Apothecary. The younger warrior's head was bowed. He was clearly in awe of being called to the presence of so many of the Legion's greatest heroes – not the least of whom was the primarch himself. Raldoron considered him and drew slow recognition of his face from memory. Melchior and Nartaba. The warrior had served in both conflicts with fortitude and honour.

'Meros.' Sanguinius said his name and the Apothecary looked up, stiffening to attention. 'My son, you have dealt directly with these people. What is your opinion of them?'

The Angel's manner was solemn and calm, and Meros seemed eased by it. 'Lord. The survivors carry no signs of chemical alterants or invasive implantation.' He hesitated, as if in consideration of something, then continued. 'I found nothing unusual about them, save that they are alive while every other Signusi we have seen is a boneless corpse.'

'Reason enough for us to have left them where we found them,' said Annellus coldly. 'They could be another ploy on the part of the xenos. Collaborators.'

'We will not grace the suggestion of abandoning these people with a moment of consideration.'

Sanguinius did not raise his voice, but his censure was clear, and the Warden was visibly cowed. 'We are not callous. We came to Signus to save it.' He nodded to Meros, indicating for him to go on.

'I have taken testimonies,' he said. 'Along with data recovered from the wreck of the *Stark Dagger*, it may be possible to reconstruct a partial timeline of events to show what happened here.'

'What do they know of the nephilim?' demanded Azkaellon. 'Any indications of force disposition and tactics?'

'They were shown picts of the xenos and their ships,' said Nakir. 'Not one of them had ever seen the giants before.'

'Then what attacked them?' The question came from the commander of the 216th, his holo-image wavering slightly.

Meros's expression stiffened. 'Captain, they spoke of armies of beings that were a mixture of… of life forms. Humanoid-animal amalgams, winged beasts and things of fluid flesh. An army of *daemons*.' He frowned. 'That was the exact word used, my lords.'

Berus snorted. 'It is as I said before. This is the result of psychological warfare, doubtless enhanced by the use of mind-control methodology. Drugs or chemicals, mental programming. The untrained human psyche is a malleable thing, open to manipulation and corruption.' The Warden threw a brief look across to where Raldoron was standing – but no, not to the First Captain, instead to his adjutant. At his side, Brother Kano said nothing, remaining in the shadows.

'With respect,' said Meros, 'no trace of such manipulation has been found in the survivors. They believe in what they are saying.'

'I'm sure they do,' said Berus, earning him some dry mutters of agreement from a few of the other captains.

'They say an inhuman warlord leads this army of monsters,' said Nakir. 'A being that calls itself "the Bloodthirster", a killer that revels in violence and suffering.' He paused. 'A second leader, another creature, is also known to exist.'

'How many of these so-called daemons are there?' asked Galan.

'The accounts conflict,' admitted Meros. 'Some of the survivors spoke of a human, a man named Bruja. He came to them claiming to be an agent of the Imperium, but he appears to have been responsible for the collapse of the Signusi government.'

'One man?' Azkaellon's doubts were clear. 'How did he do it?'

'With magick.' Raldoron watched Meros force the words out, his brow knitting. 'Bruja was allegedly subsumed by a creature of the warp, a perverse mastermind that conducted terrible acts of desecration and cruelty.' He stopped abruptly. 'I have no further explanation for you. I merely repeat what the survivors said to me.'

'He repeats a wild fiction!' said Annellus. 'And does so as if it has merit.'

'I am forced to agree with the Warden.' The words came with a hiss and crackle, broadcast from the bridge of the *Dark Page*. Acolyte Kreed, his image cloaked in duty robes, had until now offered nothing to the conversation. 'These descriptions of horrific creatures, the insistence that they are somehow unreal… They are the fanciful creations of uneducated minds that cannot grasp the scope of something alien.'

'Are you certain?' said Amit, grim-faced. 'Is that how you explain the troubling phenomena we have encountered? What of the incidents aboard our own ships, the epidemic of suicides among the crew-serfs and the remembrancer contingent? No cause has been found to explain it.'

‘Some allow their fear of the unknown to destroy them,’ Kreed said. ‘We have all seen the xenos in their many forms, the strange and the inexplicable. Yet, nothing that cannot be explained in the light of reason. These poor fools whose lives were saved by Captain Nakir’s bravery… They are not a source of credible intelligence.’

Raldoron held his tongue, even as he saw Galan and several other captains nodding in agreement with the Word Bearer’s comments. He weighed the words in his thoughts. Kreed had a fair point, but it could not be denied that there was more at hand here than could be easily dismissed.

It was Helik Redknife, watching from the wings, who finally said what many were thinking. ‘Do not be so quick to deny the words of the humans. They may not see with the eyes of a Space Marine, but they see. No warrior here assembled can deny that they have not glimpsed the raw madness of the warp from the corner of their eye, and wondered what swims in its depths.’

Raldoron could hold his silence no longer. ‘Riddles and talking in circles do not serve the mission. Whatever the origin of the enemy forces we have encountered in the Signus Cluster, they are still *the enemy*. Nakir and his men showed we can fight them and kill them. That is all that matters. Our orders from the Warmaster have not changed. We liberate this system from the hands of those who have taken it.’

‘What is your opinion, Brother Meros?’ Sanguinius’s question silenced any other voices in the chamber. ‘You have seen these creatures close at hand twice now. I would have you give us your honest, unvarnished thoughts.’

The Apothecary looked up at his liege lord. ‘The nephilim are not here, my master. These horrors are not their work. Whatever name we wish to give it, xenos, daemon or unknown… I believe we face something outside the experience of any son of Baal or Terra.’

Kano left the chamber as quickly as he could, taking leave of his commander. He found Meros in a corridor radiating off the atrium. The Apothecary’s face betrayed his troubled mind. He seemed lost in his own thoughts.

Kano had to call out to him twice before his old friend snapped out of his reverie. ‘Brother, a moment.’

Meros nodded. ‘Come to ask me why I didn’t keep my damned mouth shut?’ He grimaced. ‘Furio will probably discommend me. Now every captain in the Three Hundred thinks I’m a soft-brained idiot.’

‘Not every one of them,’ Kano offered, with a dry smile. ‘Just the ones who think they know better than you.’

Meros rounded on him, suddenly animated. ‘Where have you been, Kano? After we came back from Holst, you vanished. You never breathed a word about–’

His brittle good humour crumbled. ‘About what we saw down there, you mean? No. I did not. In all truth, I had questions that I had to find answers for.’

‘And did you?’ Meros advanced a step, frustration and anger beneath his words.

Kano spoke quietly. ‘It is my burden that I see with different eyes to you, my friend.’

‘I echo Captain Raldoron,’ said the Apothecary. ‘Riddles serve nothing. Speak to me plainly.’

‘I think what you told the Angel is right,’ Kano told him. ‘And I’m not the only one.’ He put his hand on Meros’s shoulder. ‘You saved those people’s lives. They trust you, yes? They will confide in you?’

He nodded. ‘The woman, Tillyan Niobe… She called us the Emperor’s Angels. As if she believed we truly were the seraphs of old myth.’

‘Speak to her. Find out all you can about these “daemons”. Whatever Annellus or Berus may think, they could have the key to the truth about Signus.’

‘Aye.’ Meros was silent for a moment, then he looked up again as something occurred to him. ‘What truth?’

A shadow passed over Kano’s face. ‘When I know, I will tell you.’

As he walked back to the lithocast chamber, intending to seek Raldoron for his duties, Kano found his path blocked by another officer.

‘You.’ The captain of the Fifth Company was waiting for him. ‘I will have words with you, Librarian.’

Kano’s eyes narrowed, but he bowed as protocol demanded he should. ‘I no longer carry that duty or title, Captain Amit. You know that full well.’

‘I was at Nikaea, that is so. I know that rank and title may be excised with a single word of command, but a duty… Not so easily forgotten, in my experience.’

He kept a neutral aspect. Amit was a hard man to read. At first glance, all that he was seemed there on the surface, quick and fierce. Kano knew that was only the edge of him, though. Amit ran deep and dark, and kept much more of himself hidden than many realised.

‘I know what you have been doing,’ said the captain. ‘I’ve watched you, Kano.’

‘I do not–’

Amit cut him off, his face splitting in a snarl. ‘Lie to me and I will deem you worthless, Librarian.’ He leaned closer. ‘I know you have been abroad in the fleet, seeking word of your psyker kindred in secret.’

Kano went cold. He had not yet reconnected with enough of his former comrades to gain a consensus. If Amit were to try and stop him…

The captain showed a feral smile. ‘I don’t need your talents to know what you are thinking. Rest easy, Kano. I don’t want to hinder you. I’m going to *assist*.’

‘Why?’ The question came immediately. ‘I… *We* risk censure from the Warden cadre, or worse.’

Amit’s smile broadened. ‘That threat carries little weight within the Fifth.’ Then he was cold and serious once more, his manner changing like the dousing of a lamp. ‘I don’t trust the words of narrow minds like Berus, or that zealot Kreed. What I glimpsed when I came to rescue you on Holst, the words of those survivors. All of it. It connects to something from our shared past. Archetypes of the subconscious, otherworldly forces that are more than just alien. I see that, even if others do not. You see it too.’

Kano nodded slowly. ‘More than you know, brother-captain.’

‘I believe that the entire Signus Cluster is some grand snare, Kano. A trap in which to hold the Blood Angels and destroy us. I won’t let that happen. *We* will not let that happen.’

‘And if to do so we must defy the orders of the Council of Terra? Or an edict of the Emperor?’

‘We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,’ said Amit.

The stories Niobe told him were a collection of nightmares. Meros listened and kept his silence, careful to do nothing to show any kind of judgement about what the woman said.

Before they came to Signus, even before his near-death experience at Nartaba Octus, the Blood Angel might have found doubt in what she said. Now, he thought differently. Hour by hour, the unreal became more real to him.

Meros found Niobe in an alcove of the medicae chamber where the survivors from Scoltrum were being held. She was as far from the rest of them as was possible without leaving the chamber. A naval trooper from Admiral DuCade's crew stood guard at the door to make sure that none of them could.

The others were gathered in a loose knot, talking in low tones or else saying nothing at all. She was tending the sleeping form of the woman Rozin, who rested fitfully on a low pallet.

'Her dreams are troubled,' Niobe told the legionary, quietly stroking Rozin's hair from her face. 'They torment her with what she was forced to witness. She told me she can only find rest when I comfort her, so I do so.'

'Did you see what she saw?'

'Rains of blood and nature turning on men.' She nodded wearily. 'Horrors that made me doubt my own sanity. Oh yes, warrior. I saw that.' Niobe looked down at her hands. 'I want so much to go home, back to my quiet garden, but I know it no longer exists.' A brittle smile crossed her face. 'I must seem selfish to you. I have always lived alone and had little contact with others. I liked it that way, and so did they. Just me and the plants. No one came to see the gardens, but I tended them. It was a fine arrangement.' She sighed. 'I've never had great empathy for my fellow man.'

Meros nodded at Rozin. 'The care you give this one puts the lie to that.'

'Does it?' Niobe looked up, glancing over at the rest of the survivors. 'They never liked me. Dortmund and Hengist always arguing in that dark compartment. The thief swore I was in league with Rozin, and that she in turn was in with the creatures. Always saying, "Open the door. Throw the witches out." He wanted us dead.'

'Dortmund didn't let that happen.'

'Aye. But more by lassitude than effort.' She paused. 'Rozin was there when that whoreson Bruja came to Signus Prime. The others treat her like she is tainted.'

'This man Bruja… He was a turncoat, then?'

She shook her head. 'He turned his *flesh*, legionary. And good people followed him down that path in fear of their lives. They were consumed.'

'But not you.'

'Not us.' Niobe looked up at him. 'A daemon's cruelty means nothing if it is not witnessed.'

'That word again.' The Apothecary folded his arms. 'There is no such thing. No magick, no devils and gods, no–'

'Angels?' She broke in. 'Then what are you? What is your master?'

Meros's answer faded on his lips as a motion at the hatchway distracted him. The remembrancer Halerdyce Gerwyn had cross words with the guard at the threshold and pushed past him. Gerwyn was pale and drawn in his face, and the look in his eyes was vacant and cold. He didn't see Meros, didn't really seem to be registering anything at all as he crossed the chamber towards a maintenance bay, ignoring the looks he got from medicae serfs and other Apothecaries.

The guard was shouting now, and Meros stepped away from Rozin's slumbering form, sensing something amiss.

Gerwyn pulled at the handles of a secured panel and wrenched it open. Inside, Meros saw a bank of switches for emergency control systems, the local control boards for the medicae chamber's fire

retardant nozzles and anti-decompression vents.

The naval crewman reached the remembrancer before Meros did, placing his hand on Gerwyn's shoulder. The sequentialist spun, still dull-eyed and blank of face, and struck the young man with a heavy cudgel that had been concealed in his sleeve. The guard fell bleeding to the deck and Meros broke into a run.

Gerwyn grabbed the purge lever for the retardants and twisted it a half turn. Vents in the ceiling puffed a weak breath of acrid white vapour; a full turn would release an immediate surge of dense halomethane mist that would smother any naked flame in a heartbeat.

'Stop him!' someone shouted. 'He'll kill us all!'

The chemical haze would also suffocate anyone without a legionary's augmented lungs – every survivor of Signus, every crew-serf, everyone who was not a Blood Angel would choke and die, including the remembrancer himself.

Another one, Meros thought, even as he shouted Gerwyn's name. Another soul crushed by a madness spun out of nothing. His bolt pistol was in his hand. A single shot would reduce the hapless artist to a bloody smear.

He hesitated as panic exploded around them, and heard Hengist bellowing as the survivors fled for the hatchway. Meros liked Gerwyn; the man deserved better than a lunatic's bloody death. He stood frozen, his pistol trained.

'What is he doing?'

Niobe had followed him, and all at once Meros felt the same strange deadening of the air that he had sensed in the sealed compartment on board the *Stark Dagger*.

Halerdyce Gerwyn's face shifted, expression returning to it. He blinked like a man waking from a dream. The remembrancer saw Meros, saw the bolt pistol, and he broke into weeping. His long fingers fell from the purge lever and he dropped to the deck, burying his face in his hands. Meros lowered the gun and snapped the lever back to its safe position.

Kneeling, Niobe clasped Gerwyn's arm and spoke to him. She was asking him what was wrong. 'Why did you do that?'

'Peace,' he managed, through his sobs. 'Wanted. Peace.'

Meros heard the man's words, but his attention was on Tillyan Niobe. He was thinking of Gerwyn's sudden calming, Rozin's troubled dreams now banished, the succubae that had not seen them, and the raw impossibility of the survivors themselves.

With slow inevitability, the light of the three suns was eclipsed across the *Red Tear*'s bow as at last the planet Signus Prime came into sight before the Blood Angels fleet.

No voice of man nor sign of life bled from the capital world. Sensors reaching out to touch the surface threw back streams of data that were meaningless, unreadable gibberish, and even simple optical scopes brought reports that were confused or contradictory. The whole planet was buried under a sheath of thick, bilious cloud, and so it resembled a glass orb filled with yellowed, sickly smoke. Tumultuous storm cells were visible, moving in random patterns at odds with meteorological norms. Towering jags of lightning lit the night side, curving in purple-white slashes that mimicked the shapes of fanged smiles.

The warships deployed in combat formation, squadrons of cruisers, carriers and destroyers forming their own battle elements, laying out screens of interceptors and picket gunboats. There was not a

single degree of black, starless sky that did not have a weapon pointed towards it, a warrior's attention aimed and ready. Too much had happened along the voyage to this place for any Blood Angel to take the endeavour lightly.

In the *Red Tear*'s shadow, ships with histories no less storied than the primarch's vessel moved in steady progression, waiting for the first hint of their shadowy foe. The *Covenant of Baal* and the *Encarnadine*, the *Nine Crusaders* and the *Blood's Son*, *Victus* and *Scarlet Liberty*, *Requiem Axona* and *Ignis*; these and many more drew their guns and charged their void shields.

Lead elements of the fleet – patrols of Ravens sent out in probing sorties – came back with gun-camera picts of what surrounded Signus Prime.

The two moons of the third planet were gone. They had not been destroyed by any conventional means, for that would have left debris to settle into an accretion ring and the spillage of radiation and particle traces marking their points of obliteration. The satellites had simply been stolen from their orbits, lost to the unknown; and with them had gone shipyards, barracks and manufactories for the Signus Cluster's defence forces.

The fate of the defence forces themselves was much clearer. The shells of their fleet were adrift across the orbit of the planet in a thick, ragged shroud. A cowl of dense wreckage from countless obliterated vessels and orbital complexes hung close to the edge of the atmospheric interface – military and civilian ships alike, everything from suborbital wing-shuttles never designed to venture beyond the stratosphere to interstellar juggernaut haulers, all had been killed close to the capital world and left where they fell. Plasma fires still burned in the cores of some wrecks, leaving streamers of radiation in their wake. Great slicks of debris flowed from the insides of cracked hulls and thickened the stew of fragments.

The dead ships were not just the fallout from the brutal beheading of an entire colony world. They were more than the spilled blood forgotten by a careless killer. They were more than grave markers. The silent ships had been turned into a barbed shoal of debris, which any who approached would be forced to penetrate if they meant to make planetfall. And more than that, they were there as a silent, monumental threat: vessels broken and skinned alive, hung dead in the sky like the bleeding trophies of a wild killer.

The horror might have been enough to chill the heart of even the most experienced of space's cold warriors, but this exhibition was not the end of the bleak, voiceless message. For where there were thousands of murdered ships there were ten thousand times that number of human dead drifting bloated and frozen in the vacuum.

The pilots of the interceptors brought the images to the *Red Tear*'s command deck, and the primarch looked upon them without speaking, sorrow and anger robbing him of words. Others who saw the same picts were similarly silenced, unable to frame the grotesque reality of what lay before them.

Each body had been brutalised in a way that went beyond understanding, their bones subsumed from the meat of them, stolen away like the vanished moons by the same unknowable process that had claimed lives on Holst and elsewhere. What remained in the airless void over Signus Prime had become clay for a psychotic sculptor. Millions of corpses floated in fusions of flesh, twisted into repulsive monuments, glossy with coatings of frozen blood. They had been compacted into dolmens and rings, carved like soapstone. Some of the shapes had rigid angles and toothed spires made of cut limbs; others were flattened into discs and wicked curves, meat-red and shimmering. The octal sign that had burned across Phorus was also repeated, over and over in that grisly tableau, like an offering

that only something with eyes as large as mountains would be able to see.

The vision came again, and as before in the meditation cell, Kano had no warning.

The deck cracked beneath his feet and he stumbled. Beneath the metal floor plates, a depthless black abyss revealed itself, sucking the broken fragments of the world around him into its endless, inescapable gravity.

Kano's hands came to his face and he blotted out the image of it. Before, there had been nothing to stop the onslaught of the dream-sight, but this time he knew what to expect; he had the smallest measure of armour against it, and the former psyker marshalled his defences.

Inside his thoughts, he threw up defensive walls of anti-power, drawing himself in, mentally planting his feet in the sand as a storm of sensation whirled up to engulf him.

Kano heard it coming, the shrieking phantom rising up from the gloomy deeps, faster than death, sharper than night. A gale of reeking, charnel-house stench blasting the apparition towards him on its ghostly, dead wings.

–a warrior, ironclad and daubed head-to-toe in crimson vitae, the glow of dead singularities and murdered stars enveloping him, nauseating light leaking from the joints and cracks in his sundered armour, ashen tresses stark about his howling, unknowable face, the skeletal wings of a carrion eater reaching from his back–

'No…' He put out his hand, his eyes shut tightly, denying it.

–soaked to the core with polluted blood–

The vision seemed to echo in the halls of his thoughts, as if he were witnessing it through the sight of another.

–a screaming, red-stained angel–

Kano was caught in a ripple of experience, a sense-memory radiating out across his mind. It was a precursor event; instinctively, he knew this with absolute clarity.

–impossible to escape–

Like ocean surf draining away before the impact of a tidal wave, the vision-echo was the warning of worse to come. It would be more powerful than before, he could almost taste it in the soiled air. The ex-Librarian had the sudden and total certainty of looking into the muzzle of the biggest gun in creation.

–fear and hate and darker things–

With monumental effort, Kano sealed his mind shut against the images and opened his eyes, finding himself in the corridor once more, the decks around him untouched.

A legionary of the 170th in duty robes was at his side, reaching out a hand to him, concern writ large across his face. 'Brother? Are you ailing?'

Kano shoved him away, regaining his balance. He took a step, faltered, finding his direction. 'The Angel,' he muttered, shaking his head as if that would rid it of the remnants of the psi-effect. 'This cannot be ignored… I must warn the Angel…'

He rocked off his stance and broke into a sprint towards the nearest conveyor. The primarch's sanctorum was far distant across the span of the *Red Tear*, but he could reach it if he was quick–

But then the crew-serfs all around him began to scream, and he knew he was too late.

The Blood Angels fleet was ready for every form of attack save one.

With the planet Signus Prime at its core, a cry that went beyond voice and sound exploded out into space towards the assembled vessels of the IX Legion. A vast hurricane of psychic shock, created from the bottled murder-essence of millions of surrendered souls, resonated out from the shrouded world. It swept across the crimson starships in a shuddering, immaterial wave. Void shields could not halt the ethereal power of it, and the mere matter of adamantium hulls and plasteel bulkheads were penetrated as easily as if they had been made of paper.

The terrifying distillation of pain and anguish had been weaponised by architects of grief who knew no other joy than to conduct agony like music. They had sculpted it with tools made of delusion and paranoia, edited away any lasting traces of hope and goodness that might have clung to the edges of such dark and punishing emotions. The sheer, monstrous force of the shockwave battered at every living mind aboard the ships of the Blood Angels flotilla.

The transhumans of the Legiones Astartes met it full and with their courage unencumbered. It bombarded them, took some to places of great pain and suffering; but they were the Emperor's Angels and despite its raw power, no weapon of such indiscriminate attack could defeat them. The sons of Sanguinius weathered the blow and turned it.

It was only later that the Blood Angels would come to understand that they had never been the intended targets. For this was not a force aimed at them, but a weapon of denial seeking the weakest links in their chain of war.

Every human – *every human but one* – in the flotilla was united for a fleeting moment in a single, soul-tearing scream that burned through into their minds and beat them down. It killed many on point of contact, those who were utterly unready for such crushing, black despair. Some would live a little longer before their hearts gave out, some would walk into airlocks or use knives and lasguns upon themselves or others.

The screaming went on and on, and none would be unmarked by it.

TWELVE

Revealed
Hell-Ships
Collision Course

Some might say that the most potent torment a man could experience would be to see into the beating, bloody heart of his darkest inner soul, to look upon it with perfect and unfiltered clarity. To know the rage, the hate and evil that he was capable of.

That then, but in a torrent a million times more powerful, a flood of black emotion from not one but countless dead and corrupted souls, sacrificed for just such a moment.

This was the force that swept into the psyche of the men and women who stood to serve the great fleet of the Blood Angels. Every heart and mind among them was tested to the limit, and many would break under the strain. The strongest would survive, scarred forever, tormented to their graves. The weakest became unhinged, seeing horrors wherever they turned, their minds fracturing like brittle glass.

The opening shot had been fired.

Captain Raldoron sprinted down the golden gallery towards the Sanctorum Angelus, his mien set and hard. The screams and the shrieks echoed off the walls of the ornate passageway, twisting his perception so that the statuary and great artworks took on a warped, threatening aspect.

He made a snarling noise under his breath and beat back the sensation, blotting it out. Raldoron had been trained to weather attacks of insidious nature, but the common crew of the *Red Tear* had no such defence. He saw naval officers he knew well reduced to bawling children, some clawing red gashes over their faces, others struck dumb and staring into space, trapped in the prison of their own mind. It tore at him that he could do nothing for them, but this was battle now and they were casualties. His first deed was to see ship and primarch secure; once that was done, he could enact his vengeance upon the enemy who had struck at them.

He was almost at the atrium when gunfire turned his attention. Raldoron skidded to a halt at the gallery's balustrade and saw on the deck beneath him a mass of crewmen in a huge, furious mob. Dead bodies were strewn about, and to the far side of the compartment a handful of Blood Angels stood in a line, weapons in their hands. A figure in black armour, a crozius held out before him, was shouting orders.

'You will stand down!' Warden Annellus bellowed the command to the crowd. 'Return to your posts or you will be shot!'

'Belay that!' Raldoron vaulted the railing and dropped the distance to the deck below, landing with a grunt. He turned on Annellus with cold anger. 'In Baal's name, what are you doing?'

'This rabble attacked us.' The Warden nodded to one of the battle-brothers, who bore fresh cuts

upon his bare face, one eye a ragged, ruined pit. ‘They have turned on their masters!’

‘They are not rabble,’ Raldoron snarled. ‘They are our crew!’

The legionaries had bolters raised; they could make short work of the serfs with only a moment’s burst of fire.

Raldoron shoved Annellus aside and walked into the middle of the tormented crewmen. They parted around him, pushed back as if by his force of will.

‘Look to me,’ he shouted, glaring at them. ‘*Look to me*!’ The captain reached out and grabbed the nearest man, a gunnery lieutenant whose lips moved in a constant litany of mad panic.

‘The blood and the blood and the blood and the blood and the blood–’

‘You will silence your fears.’ Raldoron’s words were adamantium-hard. ‘All of you. The terror that attacks you now will gain victory if you submit. Do not! Remember who you are! Remember your oath to the Angel and the Emperor!’

The lieutenant trembled in his grip. He looked up at Raldoron with imploring eyes. ‘It’s in my head, lord. I have to make it stop. The blood…’ Crimson matted the thin beard around his chin, streaming from his eyes, his ears, his nostrils.

‘By blood we are bonded and by blood we serve,’ said the captain, invoking the vow of duty. The words seemed to calm the mob’s anger. ‘We are the Legion, *all of us*.’ He shot an acid look towards the Warden. ‘Never forget that. Do not falter. Take strength from your comrades and brothers.’

The other legionaries had already lowered their weapons. Raldoron let the man go and turned away. ‘What can we do?’ came the call, from among the crowd. ‘If the foe can cut into our minds, what can we do?’

‘Defy them,’ Raldoron said, without turning. ‘Until they die of it. Or we do.’

He reached the primarch’s sanctum without further interruption, and as he strode across the atrium before the great brass and gold doors, Raldoron felt the subtle shift in the deck through the ceramite soles of his boots. The *Red Tear* was turning, and steeply enough that the massive flagship’s gravity plates were labouring to compensate.

As alarms keened all around, he wondered what was out there, forcing the vessel to change course. The next attack was imminent, he knew it in his marrow. His only uncertainty was from where to expect it. Raldoron’s hand fell to the hilt of the power sword sheathed at his waist. Part of him welcomed the joining of battle, while another dreaded it.

‘First Captain.’ At the doors, the Sanguinary Guard Sergeant Zuriel led a barricade group at the ready, the blade of his glaive encarmine shining. ‘The vox-net has collapsed. We’re getting intermittent signals from other commanders, other ships. There’s no pattern to the disruption, only random blackouts and the voices…’

Raldoron had suffered the same loss of signal, but nothing else. ‘What voices?’

Zuriel gestured to the captain’s vox-bead. ‘Listen. Hear for yourself.’

Raldoron tabbed his vox-relay. For a moment, there was only the bray of static; but then, faintly, he picked out words, a sing-song pattern of them in an unsettling language.

Nearby, Mendrion frowned. ‘I heard those voices before, but it seemed to fade from my memory…’

Raldoron snorted, cutting the signal dead. ‘To hell with these shadow games.’

Zuriel opened the door and allowed him entry. ‘Indeed, brother-captain.’

Raldoron entered the primarch’s sanctorum and gave a bow that earned him a brief gesture of

acknowledgement from the Angel. His master was before a fizzing, barely stable hololith in the middle of the chamber, the display showing Admiral DuCade's head and shoulders. The shipmistress looked worn and old, the bright spark of vitality that the captain had always associated with her doused by pain and distress. Like the rest of the human crew, she would not have been immune to the psychic shriek from Signus Prime. He thought of the maddened lieutenant that Annellus had been ready to kill; that DuCade had weathered the same mind-terrors and still maintained her command spoke greatly to her fortitude.

'The disorder is widespread,' she was saying. 'Deck officers are reporting in sporadically, but there have already been deaths and some… vandalism. I believe, for now, that the flagship is in no immediate danger from within.' The admiral paused, as if she was finding it difficult to breathe. Over the open channel from the bridge far above, Raldoron could hear other voices, many tight with panic, as DuCade's officers tried to maintain control.

Sanguinius's expression was grave. 'The other ships?'

At these words, Raldoron looked out past the holographic image and to the great armourglass portal that showed the void beyond. He picked out fleet cruisers, some of them moving in chaotic patterns, a few of them apparently damaged.

'The few intelligible contacts we have made report similar incidents,' said the woman. 'Crew-serfs acting erratically. Violence and panic.'

'Contain it,' said the Angel. 'If my sons are forced to fight their own crews for control of their starships, we will do the bidding of our enemy for them.'

'I will–' began DuCade, her voice rising an octave, becoming a shrill, drawn-out squeal. The hololith juddered and burst into a cloud of photons, but the high-pitched whine did not cease. The projector matrix in the deck overloaded with a screeching howl and exploded in a flare of smoke and burned metal.

Raldoron drew his pistol, fearing that this was the precursor to another psychic attack, and nearby the Guard Commander Azkaellon raised his arm, the Angelus bolter on his vambrace locking.

The other members of the Sanguinary Guard in the chamber pulled their blades. 'That noise!' cried Halkryn. 'Where is it coming from?'

The primarch turned, glaring up at the ceiling, a thunderous cast to his face as his eyes darted back and forth in search of something only he could see. 'No…' he whispered.

There were a handful of servitors in the chamber, helots for minor duties and administrator functions. As one, they stumbled from their sleep alcoves and joined in the keening chorus, puking blood and processor fluids onto the mosaic floor.

Raldoron watched them die, each falling apart in a pinkish-grey mist like deconstructed puzzles made of meat and brass.

With a ring of crystal on plasteel, Sanguinius drew his battle sword and brought it up into a fighting stance. The two-handed blade was as long as a Space Marine was tall, slender and deadly, forged in red metal with a golden, ruby-studded guard. The weapon hummed, coming to life in the Angel's hands. His wings turned against his shining armour and the primarch pointed the blade into the air. 'Show yourself, if you dare!'

The shrill note reached its zenith, a dagger through Raldoron's ears, but as it died a new affront occurred. The remains of the servitors writhed and conjoined, ropes of entrails and broken limbs groping for one another. The air lensed around the pieces of meat, as reality was turned and split.

The parts assembled a new body. The torso was an androgynous mutation with four arms and quivering, muscular flesh; a head grew into something like that of a great goat, with horns and a sharp, snorting muzzle. The newborn creature flexed and stood tall, looking down on the Blood Angels. It traced claw-fingers over its form, toying with the bloody meat it was made from, and emitted a wet, orgiastic gasp.

'Sanguinius,' it said, labouring the name with sibilance. 'You have no idea how much delight it brings me to finally have you in my domain.' The amalgam-creature gave a mocking bow and licked its dead-flesh lips. 'Welcome.'

'In all the stars, what manner of being are you?' The primarch's cold fury became disgust. 'You have the stench of the warp upon you.'

The being gave a grotesque nod. 'So true. You have such sight, abhuman. That excites me.'

Raldoron sensed a strange merging of odours in the air: a cloying perfume smothering almost everything, but beneath it the stale reek of sweat and body fluids, the tang of sulphur.

The patchwork monster brought its quartet of hands together, as if in prayer. 'Consider yourselves flattered by the presence of this proxy, the essence of I, who you shall be allowed to call Kyriss. I am the glimpse at the edge of ecstasy in death, the Perverse and the Charmed, son-daughter of the Master of Pleasure and eager servant of Q'tlahsi'issho'akshami. The void itself sings my praise.'

'Your titles mean nothing to me,' Sanguinius replied. 'What is your form, alien? Name it.'

The creature let its gaze stray, and Raldoron found it looking at him with something like hunger. '*Alien*. So limited a concept. You all know what I am.' It released a mad giggle. 'I am one of *those*. Say it with me. *Daemon*.' A length of black tongue followed the word from its lips.

Azkaellon spoke: 'You stole that designation from the people you murdered. A name from ancient myth and legend.'

For a brief instant, the beast's play at coquettish civility vanished, replaced by sudden fury. '*You* stole it from *us*!' But then it was gone again, and Kyriss bowed low. 'I greet you, Angels of Blood. I own these worlds, these souls and this kingdom, in the name and the glory of Slaanesh.' Kyriss cocked its head in a parody of demure coyness. 'Do you wish to try and take them from me?'

As Raldoron looked on, the anger that had first been present in his primarch seemed to fade away, and an icy calm descended upon the Angel. Sanguinius lowered his sword and rested it point-down towards the deck, his hands knitting across the jewelled hilt. 'You have committed an act of war against the Imperium of Mankind, and atrocities against her citizens. Know that there can only be retribution for these deeds, not accommodation, not appeasement.'

'Oh, do tell,' breathed Kyriss.

'I will make this offer once. Surrender and give up your claim on the Signus Cluster. Do so now and I promise your end will be swift and merciful.'

The creature's laughter began high and strident, falling into deep, threatening registers. 'You have no comprehension of my majesty, vulgar, trivial angel-thing. Nothing so crude can kill such splendour! I am the cardinal of the Cathedral of the Mark, the king-queen of Signus and enemy of all life. These worlds will be monuments to your despair, abhuman. Everything you love will be taken from you and tainted by my kiss.' It turned towards the viewport. Two hands pointed out, off towards the clouded mass of Signus Prime; the other pair of limbs beckoned them. 'Come,' said Kyriss. 'You will find me there. I await your pleasure.'

As the last word faded, the broken pieces of metal and meat came apart into an ugly pile, the

animating power of the monstrous proxy abruptly withdrawn.

Sanguinius stared silently at the remains for a long moment, before turning to his men. 'Take us in,' he said.

'My lord, the fleet is still in some disarray–' began Azkaellon.

'As the enemy planned.' The primarch's eyes were dark and hard, like shards of flint. 'But we have walked the road they laid for us long enough. We will not suffer this creature to live, my sons. Carry out my command.'

The second phase of the attack lurked in plain sight, concealed in the shoal of wreckage that girdled Signus Prime in a thick band of broken metal.

Deformed, mutant vessels broke free of the planet's gravity and surged forwards to assault the Blood Angels fleet, their engines vomiting smoky plumes of fusion fire. There could be no classification for these craft, no formal way to measure them against conventional laws of void-combat. They were hell-ships, and, like the remains of their crews, they had been twisted and remade into something repugnant and unthinkable. At first dormant, dead to all sensors, now they came alive with ghostly energy, motivated by powers that came from nothingness.

Some were two-headed freaks, merged plasteel and bronze that resembled the aftermath of a catastrophic warp departure. Others had been cut open, hull plates flensed away to reveal the skeletal ribbing beneath, mirroring an anatomical etching in the textbook of some medicae. Fires burned within the predatory wrecks, flaming orbs at their serried bows glaring like eyes into the dark. These ships did not so much fly through space as they did swim in it, hulls undulating. They moved like great animals, forms directed by the maleficent intelligences that inhabited the shells of what had once been the pride of the Signusi defence force.

Others opened great sails made of tanned human skin, unfurling on telescoping armatures that resembled horn and ivory. The massive spinnakers cut the light with their size, and impossibly, they filled as if a phantom wind was pressing at them. Guns grew from every surface of the hell-ships, releasing cascades of purple energy and scatter-shot discharges of spiked explosive spheres the size of Stormbirds.

Some of the craft were little more than gigantic missiles, empty hulks thrown into the path of the Imperial warships without guidance or heed to where they might go. One such ship-carcass ploughed through a flight of Raven interceptors and found the cruiser *Numitor* before it could effect an escape turn. The two craft embraced in a blaze of flame and fell out of the formation amid a cloud of ashen fragments.

The echo of the malaise that had swept across the Blood Angels crews had not yet died, and the ships of Sanguinius's fleet were struggling to stand firm against the enemy attack – but to delay would mean death, attrition and destruction. They were off their guard, robbed of balance, but there was no choice other than to fight.

Victus and the *Covenant of Baal* unleashed salvoes of lance-fire that raked over a juggernaut powering towards the flank of the *Ignis*. The enemy craft – a once-pristine system carrier that now appeared infected by a plague of rust – was obliterated, coming apart in great chunks of rotten metal. Like wormwood struck by a hammer, the hulk exploded, pieces of it flashing to atoms as they collided with the void shields of the crimson-hulled warships.

Nearby, the *Chalice* and the *Hermia* were racing to fill the gap left ahead of the flagship, surging

through the confusion of their own lines to face contact with the enemy. Bloated frigates, their panels distended from within, powered towards them leaving black pennants of toxic gases trailing behind. The star of eight was emblazoned upon their hulls, daubed in bloody colour over desecrated emblems that had once been proud exemplars of Signus's fealty to Terra.

The Blood Angels ships fired torpedo barrages and pulsing blasts from their mega-lasers, stripping all protection from the attackers, but still the enemy came on. For a moment it seemed as if the lead frigate was going to ram the *Chalice*, but then the fouled hull broke open and revealed what was within.

Inside each of the transformed ships was a mass of ropey, muscular flesh, sheathed in glistening chitin. Like a cancer, these monstrosities had grown to fill the interiors of the craft and now they burst free. Limbs that shimmered in the light of the stars of the cluster unfolded, eight spider-legs each a half-kilometre in length. The cancer-creatures inside the hulls writhed, wearing the husks of the vessels like a crustacean might carry a seashell across its back.

Ignoring zero-range fire from the *Chalice*'s point defence guns, two of the spider-craft leapt at the heavy cruiser and began to chew upon it, huge mandibles wet with fluid flashing in the dark. Streams of oxygen spurted into the vacuum as the *Chalice* began to lose her atmosphere through countless breaches. Similar violence was taking place all along the line of engagement, as every ship in the fleet found an enemy ready for it.

Ahead, the *Red Tear* opened her gun ports and let her cannons give their all, the brilliant spears of particle beams and the streamers of missile salvoes striking hard across the line of the hell-ship advance. The *Blood's Son* and the *Encarnadine* followed suit, releasing everything in their arsenal, cutting into the enemy and the vast debris zone at their backs. Perfect, pearl-like globes of nuclear fire bloomed in the night, destroying what should have already been long dead.

Kreed licked the blood from the tips of his fingers, savouring it. The fluid that bled from his eyes was dark and oily, and it carried with it a pungent odour that drew his mind back to distant Colchis. *It smells like birth,* he told himself. *Rebirth. The herald of the new.*

Silent torrents of light cast sweeping shadows across his command throne as the skies around the *Dark Page* burned with weapons discharges. Kreed rose and looked down.

His warship's bridge was a bubble of mirrored armourglass, rust-tinted and opaque from without, but within alike to standing in the cradle of the void. Massive blast shutters normally kept the great pod safe and armoured, but the Acolyte had ordered them all lowered so that he might watch the moment of betrayal unfold.

Kreed watched the spider-ships feasting on the *Chalice* and his smile grew wide. Soon, the Blood Angels would count the crew of that craft as the fortunate ones, just like the dead aboard the *Helios*, the *Paleknight* and all the other offerings.

The bleeding had not stopped; it began in the wake of the manifestation before Horus in the sacellum, and now it was slow and constant. The Word Bearer felt no pain or discomfort from it. He had come to realise that it was a sign upon him, a mark of advantage that had been left upon his flesh. He did not allow himself to dwell upon the Warmaster's words, nor the conflict that came from them. Horus had ordered him to defy the plan laid by Erebus, and Kreed searched within himself to find guilt at that; he found none. Erebus, so arrogant, so cocksure, he and the half-breed Kor Phaeron granting power like gifts to their favourites… They were not here. They did not see opportunity.

Kreed had the chance now to advance beyond them, perhaps to earn the right to stand at Lorgar's side in their stead.

If we succeed. *When* we succeed.

The great winged daemon-beast had let him live, and the crimson streaks were a reminder of that beneficence. Once again, Kreed dared to wonder about the future. *I am marked. That makes it a certainty*. He smiled to himself. *This war is already won.*

'Repeated messages from the Blood Angels command ship.' Kreed turned to face the warrior who had made the report. His name was Felleye; the hulking reaver was one of Captain Harox's hand-picked personal guard.

'They beg for our help,' said the Acolyte. He looked down. Beneath his boots, through the armourglass deck he saw the great sculpted shape of the *Red Tear*, lighting up the void with her weapons-fire and beam discharges.

Kreed felt a strange kind of calm at being adrift in the midst of such a violent confrontation. The *Dark Page* had yet to fire a shot in anger or receive even the slightest attention from the enemy.

'The woman DuCade demands we apply our guns to control of this flotilla sector,' Felleye continued.

'Let her feast on static.'

Harox came to his commander's side. 'The ships of this element are following established combat protocol,' said the captain. He pointed out the battle cruisers moving sluggishly into a protective phalanx around Sanguinius's vessel.

'As I knew they would.' Kreed nodded to himself. 'And little thought given to the dispensation of their cousins in the XVII Legion.' He watched the vessels move in their slow ballet. 'Trust is such a foolish thing.'

'Incoming approach, port quarter high,' called Felleye. 'Masters, it appears to be the shell of a civilian bulk tanker. It will pass directly through our fire corridor on a collision course with the *Red Tear*. We are the only vessel in position to fend off the assault.'

Kreed looked up and his genhanced sight picked the attacker from the blackness beyond it. A cylinder wreathed in foetid smoke, exhaust fires propelling it at increasing velocity, the flanks of the craft were covered in vile texts and uncanny symbols. The Acolyte's hand went to his forearm, where his tattooed flesh bore many of the same sigils.

He closed his eyes. If he listened carefully, opened his soul to it, Kreed could almost hear the cackling, joyful hate radiating from the incoming ship. The creatures on board were eager to taste the blood of angels.

'Orders?' said Harox.

'It is time, at last,' said Kreed, opening his eyes. 'The perfect moment of treachery has shown itself.'

Kreed returned to his command throne and savoured the act, wishing he could look upon the faces of those he had betrayed.

At first Meros thought his eyes were deceiving him. His hand pressed to the armoured glass of the viewport, he peered out at the battle and his breath caught in his throat as a flash of silent colour grew from the stern of the Word Bearers starship. For a moment, the Blood Angel believed the *Dark Page* had suffered a catastrophic internal explosion; but then the flames resolved into engine thrust

discharges and he knew the cruiser had abandoned them.

It was enough to stop him dead, even in the midst of the unfolding battle. What reason could Lorgar's sons have to flee?

'Meros!' A familiar voice called to him and he wheeled to find Kano approaching at a run. 'Quickly! They're coming!'

'Who?' His battle-brother looked fatigued, clutching a bolter to his chest. 'Kano, what do you mean?'

'Look.' The other legionary pointed an armour-clad finger out into the dark. Meros followed his direction and saw the blunt bludgeon-ship bearing down on the *Red Tear*. 'Do you see?'

Meros looked back at his comrade. 'Do you?' He tapped a finger to his brow.

Kano's expression soured. 'That does not matter now.'

The Apothecary had more questions, but they were drowned out by the impact of the tanker as it crashed through the outer hull below them.

The ship had once been a transport for volatile chemical fuels, a slow barge that took long voyages back and forth from Signus Prime to the White River and back again. Its endless circuits had been broken when the warp-spawn came to the cluster. The crew were made meat-proxy for minor beasts of the immaterium, sheathes of flesh that they could wear in order to walk in the realm of the ephemerals. In turn, they gathered more from the Signusi, who swore their allegiance in hopes that it would save them. It did, but not in the way they wanted.

The mark of Slaanesh covered every surface of the craft, the unholy words ribbing the prow of the craft making it a benediction when the time came to bring death to the Emperor's Angels.

Point of contact was portside, a machine space where pneumatic rails connected to the forward weapon bays ferried torpedoes from the main ammunition store. The beasts peeled open the walls of the tanker and swarmed out into the *Red Tear*.

The Blood Angels were waiting for them, but not in great number.

Meros saw a festering hell beneath him. Trapped between the outer skin of the flagship and the first wall of the inner hulls, the compartment had never been designed with movement of humans in mind. Below him was a plasteel pit lined with broken cables and torn runners, sparks from the control mechanisms of auto-carriages illuminating the places where the muzzle flash of bolter-fire and the beam of his shoulder lamp did not go. The prow of the captured tanker had jammed itself in place, further passage arrested by the presence of thick armour plating, but that had not stopped its horrific crew from disembarking.

Things that resembled the soft, lamprey-like dwellers of deep oceans chittered and slid over the gridded catwalks and up the impact-bent walls. They moved in leaping bounds, nests of whipping tendrils snapping out, catching a hold and hauling themselves bodily upwards. Others – gelid creatures of snapping crab-claws with spiny bodies that resembled great skinned canines – leapt incredible distances on powerful back-legs, hooting and braying.

Battle-brothers had already been taken by these things. Some, killed by the impact itself, others captured by razor-tipped tentacles or cut open with talons. Meros was intent on making the intruders pay. He fired single shots from his bolt pistol, pacing each round. The Apothecary tried to gauge the location of nerve clusters or braincases, just as he had been taught to by his mentors, but there was no

uniformity or logic to the shape and form of these monsters. Only the application of brutal overkill seemed to end them. At his side, Kano was lost in the fight, coldly executing everything that moved.With him were a dozen more warriors who had come to the attack point with the same intent – to defend the *Red Tear* until death.

The creatures sang as they came at the legionaries, ugly melodies full of ululating shrieks and gasps that rang across the bulkheads. There seemed to be no end to the deluge of the things, more and more of them spewing from the tanker's hull in a glossy, writhing swarm. The tide was rising, and without reinforcements they would soon be overwhelmed.

The breech on Meros's pistol snapped open. 'Reloading!' he shouted, ejecting the clip with speed born of focus and constant practice.

Kano did not have time to speak; instead he pivoted and aimed as one of the horrors took the Apothecary's moment of pause to throw itself at the gantry where they stood.

Kano's shots hit home, but the creature was a big one and though the mass-reactive rounds blew divots of purple flesh from its flanks, it did not die. It ignored Meros and attacked his battle-brother, knocking buckled pipes out of the way to get at him. Kano went down with a crash and was lost to sight under the bulk of the monster. Meros drew his chainaxe and laid into its dripping flanks.

Fanged mouths opened all along the side of the creature, snapping at him. With fresh loads in his pistol, Meros fed a bolt shell to each one, earning him several screeches of pain. The glutinous mass shrank back and tumbled away, revealing Kano in a crumpled heap.

'Brother-medicae!' A shout from above drew Meros's gaze. Overhead, grouped upon a length of rail, was a line of legionaries in steel-grey armour, lending their guns to the fight. He saw Captain Redknife stab a finger towards Kano. 'Get him out of there. Pull back now!'

Meros shot a crab-form scuttling up behind him and pulled Kano to his feet. Blood oozed from cracks in his battle-brother's armour; he was pale, as if the air had been sucked from his lungs. Together they stumbled up the incline towards the rest of the hastily-assembled defenders.

The invaders were at their heels, giggling at the sight of this apparent retreat. The hull space below was now a frothing mass, boiling with uncountable numbers of the enemy.

'They mustn't get past us,' Meros shouted. 'They'll get into the decks and we'll never find them all!'

'They won't,' Redknife called back. 'Valdin found something to discourage them.'

It was then the Apothecary saw that one of the Space Wolves was manhandling a conical object easily the height and mass of a human, dragging it off one of the munitions carts stalled by the impact. 'Mag-locks,' shouted the captain. 'Brace yourselves!'

It was a seeker-head, the weapon payload for an anti-interceptor missile.

With a grunt of effort, Valdin threw the warhead over his shoulder and it tumbled down into the enemy throng. Meros turned away, bringing up his hands to shield his face as it hit the tanker's bow and detonated.

In such a confined space, the explosion blew out a great plate of the *Red Tear*'s outer hull – not enough to puncture the inner armour, but enough to unseat the invaders' ship and expose the fleshy monstrosities to the harsh caress of space.

Air and debris fled into the vacuum. Secured in place on the adamantium decks by the magnetic plates in his boots, Meros held Kano upright as the enemy were blown out into nothingness, their scream-songs abruptly silenced.

Athene DuCade allowed her hands to smother her face, burying the heels of her palms in the hollows of her eyes. The warmth of her flesh felt disconnected from the moment, as if she were experiencing it second-hand. The admiral was aware of blood rumbling in her ears, thudding with each beat of her heart.

All her life she had known control: of others, of her ship, of herself. Now that seemed like a distant dream. Athene had tried so intensely to hold on, but now she knew her strength was waning. Soon it would be gone.

She heard her aide speaking. 'They are inside the ship!' His voice was tight with hysteria. 'Those monsters have penetrated the hull, infected us…' He took a shuddering breath.

DuCade's hands dropped away. 'Major, calm yourself.' She tried to say the words with authority, but they came out cracked and broken. The hard light of the *Red Tear*'s bridge prickled her eyes and she winced in spite of herself.

He turned on her, and he was florid and filmed with sweat. 'Don't you understand?' The officer bellowed the question at her, cutting through the chatter, drawing the attention of the other crewmen. 'Wake up! Look around. The Legion has led us to our deaths. This is a trap, a pit to hell!'

His face was so very red. DuCade's stomach tightened in revulsion as she realised she could see the pulse of blood though the capillaries across his skin. *How was that possible?* A tiny voice in her head asked the question, but there was no answer.

The major rocked forwards and grabbed the arms of her command chair, shouting at the top of his voice. 'Get us out of here!' He had become quite unhinged, she saw that now. 'For Terra's sake, we must run! Answer me, you cold-hearted bitch!'

In the rhythm of the crimson across his face she saw black too, ink-dark and poisonous. The major realised with a sudden start that it was *he* who was infected, with madness, with fear, with whatever disease that crippling scream had left behind.

'*Kyriss*.'

'What did you say?' she snapped.

DuCade bolted to her feet and the major staggered backwards. The name crackled through her like electricity. Her sight cleared for a moment.

'I… I never said…' The major's face was just a mask of meat hanging over something horrible that had usurped his form.

She understood now. One of the laspistols from her cross-belt was suddenly in her hand, and then she was shooting him, one bright bolt of coherent light after another, putting him down on the deck, the sizzling stink of burned flesh rising. His corpse buzzed and writhed, becoming blurry.

When DuCade looked around, the sickness in her gut twisted tighter still. All the other faces of the crew were upon her – and all of them were marked with the same writhing crimson-black. Were they laughing? She could hear them laughing.

They wanted to kill her as much as the thing inside the major had. She pulled the other laspistol and opened fire with both pistols at once. The admiral blasted them as they ran, streaks of fire crossing the bridge chamber, cutting into tainted bodies or destroying control panels.

She killed the helmsman last, as he tried to hold up clawed hands to rake at her face or perhaps to surrender. It didn't matter. All of them had the black blood in their flesh and now it pooled on the deck around her, gathering at the hem of her cloak, soaking the grey ermine.

But the greatest horror was reserved for when Athene DuCade caught sight of her own face,

reflected in the navi-monitor. Her old, warrior's face, red with exertion. Red shading to black, melting and distending on her skull.

She was not immune. The infection was in her too. Of course it was. The madness had turned into a virus, a lethal contagion. The others had fallen to it, and soon so would she.

The admiral wept bitter tears. She loved this ship so much, like a daughter. She loved her primarch and his Legion, but she had brought them to this. Now the *Red Tear* was riddled with corruption and it was her fault. It was all her fault.

DuCade's brittle self-control shattered. 'I have to atone,' she said aloud, through a sob. 'This cannot go further. Yes. Yes.'

Sanguinius would understand. She knew that he would. The Angel's forgiveness was enough.

The admiral entered the new course into the helm, beginning the thruster burn that brought Signus Prime up to rest on the tip of the flagship's bow. Engines accepted the commands and the great vessel sailed out of position, into the grip of the planet's gravity well. With her guns, she destroyed the command console so that her deed could not be undone.

The last las-bolt bored into DuCade's heart, flash-burning a hole through her chest.

THIRTEEN

Falling Tear
Fortress
This is Our Vow

Lit by atomic fires and the blaze of coherent energy, the war in the skies above Signus Prime was a tapestry of violence. Hell-ships reanimated from dead, cold corpse states threw themselves at the Blood Angels warfleet, powered by pillars of flame and other, more ephemeral means.

Many of the turncoat ships still had crews, after a fashion, but they resembled nothing of the loyal men and women who had once filled their ranks. The closest to human were the zealots, the weak of spirit and cowardly of heart who had sold their birthright and loyalty to Bruja's lie of redemption. Their fear of death had taken them into a servitude that would see them perish a thousand times over.

Then there were the other things, the monsters and the freaks, the meat-borne shades that had used the flesh of the dead as a man would wear an environment suit, so that they could walk from the warp into the realm of the material. These creatures, clad in garb of boneless human meat, played and crowed under the name of *daemon*. They had grown tired of culling the weak Signusi colonists, and now they wanted new prey to bite and claw and slice. After the seduction and murder of a handful of worlds, it was time for them to bathe in blood and hatred.

Together in this blighted place, the children of two dark gods had joined forces for a war unlike any other. Signus Prime was the beachhead, their foothold in the crude reality of matter, and each of them knew that the battle begun this day would be repeated a million times over, on countless other worlds for millennia to come.

Amidst this turmoil, the hail of laser-fire and the screaming, a great winged teardrop cast from adamantium and bronze burned a black path across the planet's wounded sky.

With nothing to stop its fall, the *Red Tear* plunged into Signus Prime's gravity well and kissed the outer atmosphere in a flickering cascade of orange fire. Plasmatic flames licked the ventral hull, wreathing the battle-barge's slender keel in coruscating bands of electromagnetic discharge. Antennae and thin beam emitters wilted under the steady, increasing heat, curling and melting like fronds of a plant meeting the fury of a forest conflagration. A great, animal moan sounded for kilometres along the length of the massive vessel, the fuselage twisting as stresses it was never meant to experience were placed upon it.

The *Red Tear* was a mighty craft, built for the punishment of a hundred wars; it was not some delicate solar sailer or gossamer-skinned xenos yacht. Yet, the battle-barge had been forged in vacuum and made for the deeps of interplanetary space. The flagship of the Legion was not a vessel configured to accept the embrace of a world and the touch of an atmosphere across its hull. The primarch's chariot was made to live and die in the void – but Athene DuCade had changed that destiny with a gunshot.

The *Red Tear* was falling, shrieking as it cut across the day-night terminator, the curvature of Signus Prime's horizon slowly rising to gather to it.

Cassiel had to shout to make himself heard over the thunderous rumble sounding down the corridor. 'Can you do it, or not?'

The deck beneath the sergeant and his men was pitching and rolling. The Techmarine Kaide knelt close to the central hatchway to the bridge, one hand bracing him against the deck and the other buried to the elbow in the open panel near the control mechanism. His eyes were unfocused, an aspect that belied his intense concentration.

'Can you open it?' Cassiel asked again, casting a look back at Leyteo. The other Blood Angel hefted a meltagun in his hand, showing he was ready to turn it on the jammed hatch as soon as ordered.

Nearby, Sarga cast a frown and muttered something under his breath about lost causes. Cassiel and his small group of his warriors had found themselves in the opportune place to race for the bridge the moment the battle-barge had begun its uncontrolled descent – but now an armoured barrier thick enough to deflect las-cutters lay between them and the command deck. Kaide's bleak assessment had not been welcomed; even with Leyteo's melta weapon, it could take hours to burn through the blast hatch.

'I can open it,' the Techmarine said, at last. Something inside the panel gave a sparking, fizzing jolt that flooded the corridor with the hot tang of electricity. The hatch grunted and slid back on hydraulic pistons, showing the legionaries the interior of the multi-levelled bridge.

The smell of burned glass and cooked meat assailed them as Cassiel led the way in, Sarga at his side panning left and right with his bolter. Every crew-serf and servitor, every auxiliary and officer, lay dead at their posts or sprawled on the floor. Many had died fleeing, laser burns scorching open their backs with wet pink wounds.

Leyteo grimaced as he followed them in. 'More insanity. Did they murder each other? For what?'

Cassiel didn't answer the question, advancing past the command throne to the apex of the bridge. Lying before him on the deck, the shipmistress was a mess of seared skin and the crumpled silks of her elegant cloak.

He looked away and out beyond the grand portal. He saw the arrowhead prow of the *Red Tear* bathed in fire.

'Survivor!' Kaide called out from one of the control alcoves.

The sergeant came closer to find a man slumped in a sticky red puddle. He wore the uniform of a communications officer, second class, and the odour of his blood filled Cassiel's nostrils. Behind the mask of his battle helmet, the Blood Angel reflexively licked his lips.

'This one won't live,' Kaide said coldly, and the pallor of the vox-officer's face made it clear the Techmarine was right. 'Where's Meros when we need him?'

'It doesn't matter.' The sergeant leaned close to the dying crewman. 'You. Tell me who did this.'

'The Admiral.' The word came out in a dry, faint whisper that was almost lost in the constant rumble of the hull. 'Killed us.'

Cassiel looked back towards the ruined helm controls across the compartment and gave a grave nod. 'Yes. It looks like she did.'

The officer died without another word and Kaide left him there, rising from a crouch. He surveyed

the brutalised control mechanisms with a severe gaze, shaking his head. ‘This was madness. Not a single console remains undamaged.’

‘Can it be repaired?’ asked the sergeant.

‘Aye,’ Kaide replied. ‘But in a span of hours, with a dozen tech-brothers and servitors to the task. This vessel will be spread out over a thousand kilometres of stratosphere long before then.’

‘Are you so quick to discount my ship and her strength?’ The voice brought them all about and then to the bowing of their heads.

The Angel entered the bridge, flanked by two of the Sanguinary Guard and Captain Raldoron. Even in such circumstance, Cassiel’s immediate reaction – and that of all his men – was to kneel and show their master fealty.

However, the primarch eschewed protocol in favour of directness, fixing Kaide with his measuring gaze. ‘Do you know how old this starship is, my son?’

‘I do, Great One,’ said the Techmarine. ‘The *Red Tear* was part of your father’s grand fleet before the age of the Great Crusade.’

Sanguinius gave a nod. ‘She *is* the figurehead of our Legion, and her time is not yet at an end.’ His golden armour shimmered as it reflected the distant fires cast across the interior of the bridge, and the Angel picked his way through the debris, moving towards the command throne.

Cassiel saw what could only be grief on the face of his liege lord as the primarch’s gaze passed over the bodies of the dead. The sergeant blinked in shock; the Angel was so far removed from mortals like the crew-serfs, even from the lives led by his gene-forged sons, that Cassiel had always believed he would be above such emotions. Not callous or aloof, but simply…*beyond* them. To see Sanguinius show even an instant of such regret gave the Blood Angel a new insight into his master’s being. He wondered if he would live long enough to reflect on it.

Raldoron stood with Sarga, peering into a damaged hololith. ‘It’s worse than I thought,’ said the captain. ‘Descent rate is increasing. Void shields are not responding. Several of the auxiliary craft have already made emergency departures, but the landing bays are in flames.’

Azkaellon, the Guard Commander, stepped after the primarch. ‘Lord, I would ask that the order be given to launch saviour pods.’

‘And how many lives would that preserve?’ Sanguinius hesitated over the body of Athene DuCade. ‘The lower decks are still in turmoil. If the escape capsules were launched now, they would be scattered. Some would be trapped in low orbit, others dragged into our wake, still more strewn across whatever lies below the clouds of Signus Prime.’ Kaide nodded silently in agreement with his primarch’s bleak estimation. After a moment, Sanguinius gave a curt shake of the head. ‘No. This is my command. Pass word to all who can hear it. Tell them to make for the core decks, the deepest and most heavily protected compartments.’

The Angel knelt down next to DuCade’s corpse and his wings opened slightly, casting a shadow over the woman. The plasma fires from the imminent re-entry lit his white feathers with flickering streamers of crimson and orange.

Raldoron gave a sharp gesture and Cassiel followed it with a nod; in moments, Kaide, Sarga and Leyteo were repeating the primarch’s commands over the vox-bands and intercom channels.

Cassiel watched Azkaellon as the Angel stood up. ‘This ship will be torn apart,’ insisted the commander. ‘If not by the force of the descent then dashed against the landscape below.’

‘No.’ Sanguinius did not grace his officer with a look. Instead, he walked to the helm console and

laid his hand upon a plaque forged from bronze and gold. The panel was bolted to a podium supporting the ship's etheric compass, and it bore the seal of Terra and the Emperor. The engravings certified the *Red Tear*'s service to the Imperium and the Legiones Astartes. 'No, I will not accept that. This vessel has carried my banner through war and peace alike and never faltered. She has served this Legion for centuries. She will not fail us now.'

Then the Angel did something that none of them expected. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, the fires beyond the great portal casting him in the dancing light of an inferno. 'I salute you,' he told the ship, meaning every word. 'And now I ask of you a single boon, old friend. Carry my sons through this trial. Take us to the heart of our enemy.'

The tremble in the deck became a quaking, became a rolling, shifting turn. Cassiel's gaze was drawn to the hellish light blazing through the bridge deck portals.

Ahead, Signus Prime filled his vision.

The battle-barge dived into the interface zone between space and world, and became a blazing crimson comet. The *Red Tear* was enveloped in a cowl of raging gas and torn plasma, flames longer than city blocks lapping at the dagger-tip bow and down the boulevards of vox-towers, gun batteries and warkeeps.

Ablative armour across the outer hull was sacrificed in sheaves of glittering fragments, peeled away in fiery embers that broke apart and crumbled into white-hot dust. The insane heat flowed like water, peculiar convection currents washing it over the vertical planes of the flagship's fuselage. Layers of space-hardened pigment puckered and boiled away, crimson sigils and proud etchings of name and purpose searing into blackened, meaningless streaks. Pennants made of flex-steel evaporated, becoming sketches of themselves, then nothing.

Here and there on the outer surface of the hull there were things that had been deposited by the enemy's intruder ships to wreak petty havoc on the vessel. These minion-creatures – simple-minded predator things from the warp-deeps brought into this reality – burned and shrivelled in the firestorm. The meat-puppets they were bound to turned to ash and their undying anti-souls shrieked back into the immaterium, banished and gone.

Metal buckled and armourglass bubbles crazed and cracked as the heat grew more intense. The *Red Tear* was deep in the passing, committed to the full length of the fall. The firestorm of re-entry ripped at the ship in frenzy, peeling back long curls of heat-deformed plasteel like shavings of wood from a carpenter's plane. Even as the blade-shape of the ship knifed through the outer atmosphere, the fires of the screaming sky gained entry to the inner decks and laid waste. Corridors that ran for kilometres channelled waves of burning atmosphere, pushing a shrieking roar of overpressure out before them. Legionaries and crew-serfs alike perished in the blaze; the latter died immediately, the former suffering a slower end thanks to the aegis of their power armour. Death-black cinders and roiling smoke followed the fires. Secondary explosions blasted craters in the surface of the deck, where volatiles or ammunition stores were touched by super-heated air and excited to combustion. Trains of fire burned all around the warship as its overtaxed systems struggled to lock down compartments and trigger suppression systems.

The *Red Tear* broke through into the uppermost reaches of Signus Prime's ionosphere and continued to fall. The flagship's thrusters were dead, but autonomic systems in the vessel's gravity control matrices managed a sluggish reaction to the descent. There was no way to stop the battle-barge's

plunge, but every iota of power in the system turned to arresting it as best it could. Great humming arcs of electrostatic energy flashed and snarled, fighting the immutable, inescapable pull of the planet below.

Brief, brilliant aurorae radiated out from the winged metallic shape, forming patterns and colours that no natural event could ever hope to duplicate. Radiation scintillated and faded, unseen and unremarked. The air thickened and grew dense, the silence of space suffocated under a growing, thunderous bellow as the craft's hypersonic velocity tore open the sky. Unnatural clouds that swirled like muddy water parted in a churning swell as the *Red Tear* broke into them.

The haze that shrouded the planet clung to the world in a sickly cloak, wreathing it as the stink of death would adhere to the body of a dying man; but the Blood Angels ship was ripping it open, for the brief moment of its passage forcing the cloying yellow mist to branch around it.

Such was the force and speed of the falling craft that in its wake the displaced air created instances of pressure inversion. The clouds rushed in to fill the emptiness and sounded great clarions of thunder, sky-quakes so loud that they carried to the surface far below. Micro storm cells were called into being all around the flagship as it blasted through the cloud deck and across the stratosphere. Here, windborne swarms of bat-winged daemons and other flying horrors spat and yowled as the falling ship blew through their aerial domain, buffeting them with the shock.

The *Red Tear*'s path across Signus Prime was a burning line in the murky sky, marked by a rain of fragments torn from its hull. Like a behemoth avian of ancient legend, it exploded from the lower reaches of the turbid clouds and blazed over the tall mountain ranges of the planet's single giant super-continent.

Under a slaughterer's sky weeping crimson and black, the fire-borne warship made its final descent. The starship's burning shadow swept across denuded hillsides and over the husks of raped settlements, briefly eclipsing towers of smoke from kilometre-high funeral pyres and hellish monuments erected by fools unaware of what powers they were courting.

The teeth of pinnacle peaks rose up to rake the underside of the vessel as the ground came ever closer. Obsidian mountains slick with the black blood of the earth crowded the ship's glide path, the tallest of them clipping the great ventral sail extending down from the *Red Tear*'s underside. Stressed beyond all imaginable tolerances, the adamantium fin cracked along its length and spat flames. The cruiser bays were ripped apart under the trauma of the glancing impact and the sail ripped away. Thousands of tons of plasteel and ceramite became a torrent of burning wreckage, beheading the mountains beneath and laying a slick of debris across an area as large as a city.

With a great and ragged wound bleeding fire across its belly, the flagship dropped towards a swath of long, low prairie that seemed to reach to infinity. Before the invasion came to foul this world, this place had been known as the Heartlands – a landscape of great natural beauty and endless abundance.

There was nothing of that left now, only endless blasted wastes of blood-soaked mud, and the skeletal remains of petrified trees beneath a burning, ashen sky. These were the Plains of the Damned and they embraced the *Red Tear*'s violent arrival.

The earth shook and cracked as the flagship slammed into the rolling desert. The bow was a sword point and it ripped open the dead ground, forcing hills of polluted mud and broken stone aside. Velocity bled away from the vessel in ripples of heat lightning, searing the landscape and igniting hundreds of fires. Cut in the path of its motion, a valley of blackened, seething sludge extended out behind the *Red Tear*, a terrible new scar opened across the face of the planet by the violence of the

landing.

And with a long, final howl of tortured metal, the flagship of the primarch Sanguinius came to rest in the blasted wilderness. In a cradle of flames and vaporous mist, the vessel groaned as it found balance under its own weight. Scattered out behind it for leagues were pieces of itself, lost in the fall or torn free in the final crash.

Broken, fallen, but undefeated, the *Red Tear* had defied its enemy and honoured the wishes of the Angel.

Raldoron blinked dust from his eyes and rose to his feet with a snarl, shoving aside a piece of adamantium plating that had crashed to the deck from the ornate ceiling above. All around him, metal moaned and cracked as it settled. The deck was canted at a slight incline, but they appeared to have made planetfall relatively intact. He smiled briefly at the cool estimation of the situation.

He tasted the acrid stink of burned plastic at the back of his throat as he pushed through the debris that had come adrift in their plummeting descent from orbit. Here and there, his battle-brothers were picking themselves up from where they had fallen. The last, shuddering collision with the surface had thrown them from their footing, putting the sons of Baal down among the dead crew.

All but one of them.

The Angel stood before the compass podium, one hand upon the broken device, the other at his side. His wings jutted straight out from his back, furled like white sails. Sanguinius had ridden the ship all the way down, his feet set firmly, and never moved from his place, staring out through the great oval portal across the bridge as though he were daring fate to knock him down.

Fate, it seemed, had not risen to the challenge.

Azkaellon threw the First Captain a glance as he helped Zuriel to his feet; the look was unreadable. He turned away.

The primarch's hand lifted from the compass and Raldoron saw that the metal there had been deformed by the Angel's superhuman grip. His master strode towards the oval window. The eye of the bridge was cracked and broken, and a cold wind came stealthily through the gaps in the shattered armourglass, bringing with it the odour of death.

Sanguinius stood at the portal and his lips moved. Raldoron did not catch the words, but he saw the intent in his master's eyes. A question, he decided. But to whom?

He drew a breath. 'My lord. We live still.'

'Indeed.' The primarch's manner shifted, and something troubling was pushed away from the surface, to be eclipsed by a strong and confident aspect. 'It will take more than that to break us, Ral.' He placed a hand upon the captain's pauldron. 'We are angels all; when we descend from the sky, worlds tremble to witness it.'

Azkaellon, however, did not seem so convinced. 'Master, the battle in orbit rages still. Without the *Red Tear*'s guns, the fight may not so easily go to our brothers.'

'This tide will not turn against us,' Sanguinius insisted. 'I need not dream that reality to know it. Raise the vessels above, name the *Covenant of Baal* as the new command ship and tell them to fight on.' He closed his golden gauntlet into a fist. 'I want the skies of Signus to be ours.'

'And this, my lord?' The Guard Commander gestured out at the desolate lands ranged out around the crash site.

The Angel's face broke into a smile. 'This? My son, the winds of war have delivered us to the heart

of our enemy. This place will be our beachhead. Our castle keep from which to strike at the fiends who dare oppose the Imperium!'

The hard edge of sheer will in the primarch's words made new steel grow inside Raldoron's heart. He felt his hands contract into fists, heard the distant rush of blood in his ears.

'For days now we have walked with caution across the Signus Cluster, encountering the inexplicable and the monstrous,' said Sanguinius, and it was as if the words came from Raldoron's own thoughts. 'The creatures infesting these worlds have toyed with the Blood Angels for long enough. My patience is at an end.' He looked down at the fallen crewmen. 'They struck at the weakest of us, the ones who gave their lives to serve the Legion even though they were not fortunate enough to be remade by my father's gene-tech. This tactic is a coward's mark, my sons, and it will not endure.' The primarch pointed out into the blasted distance. 'They wait for us in that wilderness. They believe they have cut us deeply, that we are unprepared for whatever foul manner of warfare is ranged against us.' Then he laughed, strong and powerful and daring. 'They do not know us.'

Within hours, the *Red Tear* was no longer a starship. The battle-barge became a fortress, a vast island of burned red metal in the middle of the dead lands. The warriors of the Legion secured the vessel and assessed the damage. What could be used for war was made priority, and what could not be saved was discarded. The survivors of the human crew were few; many had died in the fires and the impact, but more from the ultimate effect of the psychic malaise that had infiltrated their minds. They simply died of fear, hearts seizing in their chests as they crossed into the dark shadow of this forsaken world.

Signus Prime's sky seemed to hate the very idea of the Blood Angels daring to set foot upon its blighted surface, and a slow, steady rain of burning brimstone fell from the pregnant clouds above. Sulphur stench and hot, searing winds raged across the landscape, carrying needle-sharp grains of abrasive sand.

The word from orbit came sporadically at first. Cruisers and frigates were lost up there, unseen by the eyes of the primarch. The hell-ships were met in force and the line of attack broken; the mutant craft fled back to the safety of the thick debris belt. So began a game of strike and counter-strike, strike and fade, as Imperial ships hunted the turncoat barges in a sky full of razors.

A message from the *Ignis* told them that the fleet had begun a systematic barrage against the shoal of wreckage, intent on grinding it all into radioactive dust. Nothing would be allowed to escape Signus Prime.

The Angel had smiled coldly; he knew that the creature Kyriss and its minions did not wish to leave this place. Their wish was to have the Legion come to their gates, and now it had been granted. It mattered not if Athene DuCade, in her last panicked moments of life, had been directed by their sinister hand or by the madness that had infected her. The sons of Sanguinius were here, and war like no other would walk with them.

Meros felt an odd, uncomfortable sensation at the back of his skull. A faint loss of balance, although it could never have been that; no, more that now-familiar sense of *wrongness* that sat poorly with him.

He looked up at the dark, seething clouds and felt it keenly. The planet did not seem correct, and in a manner that was not easy to put into words. It was as if he were looking at the creation of a crazed artist painting in shades of blood and fire across a sallow canvas, an image born of fantasy rather than

reality.

The great open arena where he stood only compounded the sense. Gathered in a loose formation, dozens of legionaries in full battle armour cast their faces to the alien sky, looking out across the towers and crenellations of the grounded starship. All of them were armed and ready – no, *eager* – for combat.

It seemed strange to be here, atop one of the warkeeps along the spine of the *Red Tear*. Meros had never stood upon the hull of the great ship before, and to do so under this sky instead of the black, airless void of space was stranger still. Already a sprawl of defensive revetments and trenches was being cut around the ship's girth. Landers had been deployed, along with lines of the ground vehicles that remained operational. The IX Legion was digging in.

A cross-section of officers and battle-brothers from the Three Hundred had gathered, some from contingents already aboard the flagship, others newly arrived aboard Stormbirds and Hawkwings from the fleet elements in orbit.

Meros felt out of place, and for the second time. If anything, this was more extreme than the moment when he had been brought forward in the lithocast chamber to present himself to the captains and commandery. He was truly walking among the most lauded heroes of the Blood Angels, and it was done without circumstance or ceremony. For a moment, the Apothecary dared to think of the officers at his side as no more than fellow warriors, Baalite and Terran-born sons united in their fealty to the Angel and the Emperor… But he could not.

In all his life, Meros had never felt so inconsequential. The armour and weaponry of the warriors around him was magnificent with honour sigils and marques of tribute. Even in their regular battle plate, they walked like champions out of high legend.

The moment passed; it was difficult to maintain the emotion after what he had witnessed, and the grim mood that clouded his thoughts as the black stormheads clouded the sky returned once more. A bleak temper was cast across the face of every Blood Angel assembled. The others had heard only fragments of what had transpired in orbit, and the primarch had gathered them so that they might know the fullness of it.

The Angel wanted his sons to hear him speak, not through the haze of a hololith but in person where they could look upon his face and know it to be true.

Armour-clad, his golden gauntlet cast into amber by the morose light of Signus, his master pointed at the Apothecary. 'Tell them, Brother Meros,' he commanded. 'Tell them what you saw.'

Meros hesitated, and his gaze found Kano, who stood at Captain Raldoron's side. His friend gave a slight nod, encouraging him to speak; but the reaction was not kind. With care and clarity, he relayed what he had seen from the portal gallery aboard the *Red Tear* in the moments before the enemy horde had boarded the flagship by brute force. It was not the description of the freakish monstrosities that the legionaries had dispatched which caused disquiet, but the actions of Tanus Kreed and the *Dark Page*.

'Did you witness Kreed's vessel firing on the attackers?' The question boomed from the vocoder block of Brother Cloten, a Dreadnought warrior from the 88th Company.

'No,' Meros told him. 'I saw only the heels of his ship as he turned and fled.' It was impossible to keep the bitterness from his voice. 'The retreat of the *Dark Page* left the *Red Tear* vulnerable. There was no mistake about it.'

'This medicae was not on the vessel,' Cloten grated. 'He does not know what took place there!'

‘The cut-flesh speaks the truth.’ Helik Redknife stood, arms folded across his chest. ‘I saw it too. Kreed ran from the field of battle.’ The Space Wolf turned his hard eyes on Azkaellon. ‘Tell me that is not so, Guard Commander.’

Azkaellon’s hard, hawkish face stiffened. ‘It is as Brother Meros says. The *Dark Page* deserted us in our moment of need. The *Encarnadine* tracked the ship into the debris zone and lost sight of it. They did not answer any communications. At no point did Kreed’s vessel trade fire with the enemy.’ He frowned. ‘The foe ignored it completely.’

Harsh words were exchanged; many of the assembled warriors found it difficult to accept that a brother Space Marine – even one from another Legion – would so blatantly abandon another.

‘There are dark works at hand here, my sons.’ Sanguinius said, his voice carrying over the keening winds. ‘And they seek to challenge us.’ He spoke to them of the creature that called itself Kyriss, of how it had dared to manifest in the Angel’s sanctum and offer him battle, posturing and goading. ‘We will make war across this tormented world, if we must. And this being I will see to its grave. We must cut off the head of the snake, kill this abomination Kyriss and end its reign.’

‘Still we speak of “abominations”...’

The words were a low growl, and some of the warriors moved aside to see who had spoken. Captain Amit stepped forwards into the middle of the arena to face his primarch. ‘Why do we not call it what it is, my lord? Can we not say the name?’

‘Remember your place, Flesh Tearer,’ warned Azkaellon, but Amit did not acknowledge him.

‘I will say it if you will not,’ he continued, his eyes never leaving those of the Angel. ‘*Daemon*.’

A ripple of voices moved through the assembled men, and Meros heard the familiar, arch tones of Annellus. ‘That name is for children’s stories, a relic of old mythology and legend banished by the Emperor’s illumination!’

Amit rounded on the Warden, stabbing a finger at him. ‘Do not deny what you saw with your own eyes. These things we are fighting are not the nephilim, they never were! And they are not alien, they are beyond that.’ He looked around, glaring at the others. ‘Any one of you, I defy you to tell me you do not sense it too. Nothing spawned from our universe could encompass these horrors, and we forswear that to our cost!’

‘You have made your point, Amit–’ began Sanguinius.

‘No,’ he snapped, daring to speak over his master. ‘No, my liege. I have not.’

The Sanguinary Guard Mendrion rocked off his stance at the primarch’s side and stepped up to chastise the captain, but Sanguinius’s hand held him in place.

‘I have more to say,’ Amit intoned. ‘And many will not wish to hear it, but in the name of Baal and Terra it *must* be voiced!’

Meros felt his blood run cold as his primarch’s angelic visage became as hard as carved marble. ‘Speak then, my son.’

Amit nodded, and Meros saw something in the captain that he had never seen before: a moment of doubt, of sorrow. ‘My fears about Signus Prime have been proven right. This place is a trap for our Legion. We have been assailed by lies and shadows since we first set sail.’ He shot a brief look at Kano, then away again. ‘And Kreed’s duplicity in leading us to it can mean only one thing. We have been *betrayed*.’

‘Kreed might lack courage,’ said Raldoron, breaking his silence. ‘But he has no reason to lead us to ruin.’

‘You limit your thinking, First Captain,’ Amit replied. ‘Tanus Kreed is not the architect of this. He’s a follower, not a leader.’

‘Erebus?’ Azkaellon said the name without thinking.

Amit shook his head. ‘I say look higher still, brothers. Who sent us here?’

‘Choose your next words carefully,’ said the primarch, becoming very still.

The captain gave a grunt of humourless laughter. ‘You know that is not my way, master. I must say what I believe, and I believe the Warmaster sent us here with a lie on his lips, with full knowledge of what he–’

Gold armour flashed like lightning and Meros recoiled at the crackling shock of metal on ceramite, the deep rush of white wings snapping against the air. Suddenly Amit was sprawled on the hull with a new impact crater on his careworn armour and Sanguinius standing over him. The Angel moved so fast, the Apothecary had barely registered the movement, sweeping in and knocking Amit down with the pommel of his great sword. The red blade now came about in the primarch’s hands, and the tip rested upon the captain’s bared throat.

‘You will beg forgiveness for casting such aspersions on my brother Horus,’ he spat, his expression thunderous, ‘and then I will cut this armour from you and mark you for punishment.’ The icy rage with which the threat was delivered robbed Meros of his breath.

‘I-I will not,’ Amit managed, blood flecking his lips, his full measure of courage spent in that moment. ‘The daemons knew we were coming. Who told them?’

‘Kyriss knew your name, lord,’ said Raldoron quietly. ‘He knew *us*.’

‘My brother would not betray me!’ Sanguinius shouted the denial, and the wind caught the words. ‘A betrayal of one is a betrayal of all, and that would be an affront to our father! Horus is loyal, and Lorgar may be wilful but he would never defy the Emperor. None of us would.’

‘Not so, Great Angel.’ Redknife took a step forwards. ‘Such acts have already been committed.’

The primarch turned, bringing his blade to bear on the Space Wolf. ‘No riddles, son of Fenris.’

Redknife bowed his head. ‘My brothers came here to watch you, my lord. On the Wolf King’s orders, in the Sigillite’s name. To report if you were to stray, as *others* have strayed.’ He looked up. ‘As the Crimson King has strayed.’

‘Magnus?’ Complex emotions crossed the primarch’s face, and no warrior dared speak. A moment of disappointment flashed in Sanguinius’s eyes. ‘He broke his word.’ It was not a question.

A palpable sense of shock washed over the Blood Angels at the enormity of such a prospect. It seemed impossible to comprehend: the fraternity of the primarchs should have been beyond the base human potency of such sentiments, and yet as Meros listened with his heart thudding in his chest, as he looked upon his master, he knew this was truth unfolding before them.

Like a dagger of ice, an instant of perfect recall cut across the line of his thoughts. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it had only been weeks since the battles on Nartaba Octus, since the eldar soulseeker-round in his gut that had almost cost the Apothecary his life. Meros’s hand fell to the place where the scar lay across his belly.

In the near-death that had followed, inside a Legion sarcophagus as Meros struggled to survive against the telepathic alien poisons in his blood, a strange and powerful vision had come to him. Another Blood Angel, familiar and yet unknown, fighting at his side.

The phantom’s final word to him had been a name, spoken like a warning. Like a curse of the darkest order.

Horus.

The Apothecary's reverie shattered like glass and suddenly he returned to the moment. All around him, every warrior was speaking at once, arguing vehemently over the implications of Amit's suspicions and the bleak possibilities of Redknife's revelation. He saw Annellus and Cloten in fierce disagreement, Raldoron staring off into the distance as if bereft, Azkaellon denying it over and over, Nakir and Carminus in grave concord.

Then thunder came on an angel's wings.

Sanguinius, his fangs bared in fury, gave a snarl and rolled his great sword around in an arc of shining metal that hummed through the heavy air. He brought the blade down with ground-shaking force, embedding the tip in the scarred and blackened adamantium of the *Red Tear*'s hull. The mighty weapon rang like a struck bell, releasing a clear and perfect chime that echoed over the wasteland. He released his hand from the hilt and let it stand there, vibrating with the force of the resonant blow.

'*No*,' he told them, and it was command enough that for one moment Meros felt it might stop the turning of the world beneath their feet. The Angel looked at each one of them in turn, and the noble splendour of his face was changed; the aspect of the seraph become the severe bearing of a warlord. 'Whatever truth hides from us now, whatever truth has been hidden… It counts for nothing on this day, in this place.' Sanguinius reached down and unlocked one of his gauntlets, casting the armoured glove to the deck.

Raldoron and Azkaellon were the first to do the same, and within moments every warrior on the deck had followed the Angel's gesture.

'Draw your blades,' he told them, pausing to offer his hand to Amit so the captain could regain his footing.

Meros pulled his chainaxe from the mag-lock on his back, and all around him he saw Blood Angels drawing combat knives or unsheathing battle swords. An orchard of naked steel glittered in the dull sunlight.

Sanguinius gripped the bared edge of his great sword and squeezed. Rich, bright crimson flowed from his palm and down the length of the blade. Meros nodded and gripped the razor-sharp tungsten teeth of his axe. His battle-brothers all drew blood, droplets of red spattering the hull, flowing together and merging. It was the tradition of the chalice, but writ large and held upon the edge of a killing blade.

'This is our vow,' said the Angel. 'We will do what must be done here. Fight and win. That is all that matters.'

For now. Sanguinius did not say the words, but every one of his sons heard them.

FOURTEEN

The Plains of the Damned
To the War
Bloodthirster

Kano walked across the landing bay, picking his footing with care. He edited the pain of each step from his thoughts by the force of his will, taking the white heat and containing it in an impregnable box. The figurative container was brimming, though, and all the actions of the neurochemical glands in his bio-implants and the drug philtres he had been dosed with did not stem the flow of agony. Kano was walking on blades, enduring it with stoic, iron calm.

The fleshy hulk that had attacked him in the hull spaces had come upon him with sheer force of mass, cracking his armour and threatening to flatten him under its weight. His warplate, fractured from head-to-toe and near useless, had been stripped from him and sent to Metriculus's metalworkers in vain hopes of repair – but the masters of arms had many other tasks to attend to and Kano doubted he would be garbed in anything other than duty robes for the foreseeable future.

The armour had been ruined saving his life, but still it had not been enough to preserve him fully. The crushing bulk of the monster had strangled him like a giant constrictor, breaking many of his bones despite the dense metallic content of his gene-altered skeleton. Minor organs in his torso had burst, requiring surgery to excise and replace. By all rights, the Blood Angel should have been in the deep torpor of a recovery sleep, but he had refused to activate his sus-an membrane. He could not afford to be out of this war.

And yet, as he walked through the masses of warriors preparing to disembark, he knew that he already was.

'Emperor's blood!' He pulled back his hood and turned to find Meros advancing toward him from out of the shadow of a Phobos-class Land Raider. Sergeant Cassiel and the rest of the squad were assembled at the vehicle's drop-ramp, preparing their weapons for deployment. His friend's expression was severe. 'Brother, have you mislaid your senses?'

'I…' His words died in his throat. Kano lost all momentum for what he was about to say.

Meros saw it. 'What?' he asked. 'Are you going to lie to me? Tell me you are whole and well and ready to meet the foe?' The medicae shook his head. 'Perhaps others might believe you, but I know you best. I saw that fiend's attack.'

'I should be dead,' Kano retorted. 'I came to thank you for saving my life, but now I don't think I'll bother.'

'We've paid and repaid that debt to one another more times than I can count,' Meros shot back. 'You're not coming with us.' He shook his head.

'You don't give me orders–'

'I do now!' The medicae almost shouted, drawing the attention of others. 'I asked the Master

Apothecarion about your injuries. He still thinks you're lying at rest in the infirmary!'

Kano's gaze dropped to the deck. 'I can't stand idle,' he hissed. 'Meros, I just can't. You don't know what it was like, to be in physical contact with that warp-spawned thing.' Venom laced every word. 'I heard its voice. It *sang* to me.'

Meros's annoyance faded. 'I heard nothing… But then, I imagine I do not have the ears with which to listen, yes?'

'Yes,' Kano replied. He said nothing for a moment. The roar of Hawkwings landing out in the staging zones beyond the open launch doors echoed all around them. A troop of Terminators was marching into the haze outside, the deck resonating with the collective drumming of their armoured feet.

'What did it say to you?' Meros glanced up as a flight of Bullock-pattern jetbikes sped over their heads, the warriors in their saddles matching the crimson of their blunt prows.

In that instant it knew my name. Kano closed his eyes. *It told me it was one of the Gida'Ljal, the spawn of the Ruinous Powers*. 'It made promises to me,' he told his battle-brother. 'About how we would all die, unless we surrendered.'

The other legionary snorted. 'That's all? If I had a single Throne gelt for each time that threat was aired, I could buy my own galaxy.'

'You don't understand,' Kano said, through gritted teeth, trying to find the words to explain and failing. 'I have to be there. Something is coming and I… *We* have to be ready to fight it.'

'We?' Before Kano could say more, Meros leaned in. 'Brother, listen to me. I know you won't take to your rest, not now, not at the very moment this battle truly begins.' He prodded his friend in the chest. 'Even if you are not fully mended. That's why I vouchsafed you to the Master Apothecarion, told him you did not require the sarcophagus and sleep to heal.'

'Ah.' Kano gave a weak smile. 'I had wondered. Thank you.'

Meros's expression became severe. 'But if you do something foolish and perish, then don't damn well thank me for it.' He prodded him again. 'You're *not* coming with us. You'll stay here, defend the *Red Tear*. Say it.'

At length, Kano gave a weary nod. 'I will.'

Meros did the same and turned back toward the Phobos. He took two steps and paused. 'You're right,' he said without turning. 'We will need you in this fight. All of you. No matter what the edict says.'

Raldoron was met by the sight of a ring of golden seraphs as he entered the arming hall. Azkaellon and the rest of the Sanguinary Guard stood at equidistant points around the low podium in the middle of the chamber, where the primarch was attended by his servitors. The duty gear the Angel had worn about the ship was being prepared for war, pieces of the ceramite being removed and replaced with battle kit tailor-made for this combat environment. As each element of Sanguinius's armour was removed and refitted, so Azkaellon and the guards did the same, mirroring their master with solemn care.

The First Captain did not have the luxury of such finely-wrought wargear. His was only a suit of Mark IV plate, and while it was excellently maintained it seemed simplistic compared to that worn by Azkaellon. Although he did possess ornate pauldrons and a winged armet for rare occasions such as blade-moots and exhibition wars, they had not seen use since the passing of the Legion at the Ullanor

parade, and he wondered if they ever would again.

The primarch's armour was brass and gold, it was awe and majesty, cut and beaten into heavy sheets to be draped across a warlord. His angelic wings lay about his powerful shoulders in cowls, the curve of them resembling more the pinions of a gigantic hawk than a seraph. The decorative rings and chains that normally adorned the feathers were gone, leaving them unfettered and ready to spread wide.

Amid the shimmering golden greaves and warplate, ruby discs cut through with carved droplets of black sapphire gave proud sign to the Legion's chosen sigil. Laurels and engraved battle-markers hung from the Angel's belt, and he had his carnodon cloak bound to him with ropes of threaded carbon-fibre and gold. Raldoron's eyes were drawn to the red metal of his master's great sword, which was presently being cleaned and prepared by a Techmarine.

Sanguinius looked up and beckoned Raldoron with a nod as the last piece of armour snapped into place. 'You are dismissed,' he told the others.

Without a word, the Sanguinary Guard led the procession out of the hall, and the captain felt Azkaellon's questioning gaze on his back.

'We are ready, then?' said the Angel.

'The Legion awaits.' Raldoron nodded, removing a pict-slate from a pouch on his belt. 'Captain Redknife requested permission to join us in the fray, and I granted it. The fleet elements in orbit report the situation is stable, but contested. We do not yet have void-superiority, but then neither does the enemy.' He tapped the display to activate it. 'Our scouts have reported in. We have located what appears to be a single, massive stronghold several kilometres to the north.'

'A single stronghold,' repeated the primarch. 'Ral, the colonial agency census mentioned six settlements alone in this quadrant.'

'Indeed. I sent scouts toward those coordinates. All gone, my lord. Not even ruins remaining.' He offered the slate. 'This is all that still stands.'

Sanguinius took the device and studied it, paging through the aerial images of the enemy fortress. He raised an eyebrow. 'Why are these picts so poor?'

'Interference with the optical systems of the monitor birds we sent to over-fly the target.' He paused. 'The drones came back… different. I had them put down and burned.'

'Difficult to estimate the size,' said the Angel.

'The central spire is approximately three kilometres high,' Raldoron explained. 'Laser ranging refused to give a consistent estimate. It's almost as if the building isn't fully *there*.' He had pored over the images himself, until a strange, creeping discomfort in his gut forced him to look away. The stronghold resembled an ancient cathedral of tall, narrow cones and massive chapel arches. Around the central tower, there were four smaller spires, then a ring of eight more. The high angle of the pict from the monitor bird showed a clear geometric pattern to the architecture, but the base of the structure was shrouded in a peculiar pale haze that glowed, illuminated by a reddish glow from thousands of misted windows. The construction of the great cathedral was odd, its surface mottled as if it had been built from improperly finished stones.

'A lance cannon shot from orbit would test the reality of this place without question.' Sanguinius spoke as if it were to himself.

'They cannot see it from up there,' Raldoron told him. 'I voxed Galan on the *Covenant of Baal*, asked his gunners to make a sounding for possible bombardment. He returned contact asking me why I

wanted a bald patch of desert turned to glass.'

'It's here,' said the primarch, 'as clear as…' He stopped, frowning at the blurry images. 'Well. Perhaps not.' He handed the slate back. 'This was never going to be a war about holding high ground and sniping from distance.' Sanguinius's face twisted in a sneer. 'That's not what we do, not who we are.'

Raldoron swallowed and ventured a thought. 'The creature Kyriss knows that. If this is a trap as Amit said, that place is a lure. They're waiting for us in there.'

'I know,' said the Angel. 'But a foe who thinks we do not *see that* is a foe we will break upon his own hubris.' He walked to where the sword was resting and picked it up as if it weighed nothing at all. Sanguinius looked at his own reflection in the blade, and Raldoron saw a glimpse of his troubled eyes. 'Once I step out of this room, we are committed, old friend. We march to battle again.'

'We've done it a hundred times before, master,' said the captain. 'It is the crusade.'

'Is it?' The Angel turned to face him. 'Nothing about this mission has been what it purported to be. Our enemy unknown to us until this day, hiding behind a lie. The forces ranged against us, twisting the possible like threads of silk… And then the terrible question Amit brought to voice.'

'Brother Amit always takes to the extreme,' offered Raldoron.

'He does,' said the primarch, 'and it is why I keep him close. My savage son is unclouded by concerns that occupy others too greatly. As I and my brothers are shards of my father's will made manifest, so you as my sons are shards of mine. So Amit says what no other will dare to say.' It seemed like an age before Sanguinius spoke again, and the weight of his words made Raldoron's breath catch in his throat. 'Could my brother have turned his face from my father?'

'Why would Horus do such a thing?' The captain blinked. 'Why would he send us out here, into this madness?'

'To keep me isolated, so I might not dissuade him from some foolish choice?' said his master. 'He has been distant ever since he fell on Davin. Words between us were no longer warm and comradely. I paid it no mind, I thought it a hold-over from his injuries…' He smiled ruefully. 'It is a great shock to be brought to the edge of one's mortality. More so for one such as Horus.' The smile faded. 'In my mind, Ral, I play a cruel game, a torment upon myself. I imagine that Amit is right. And I imagine the full scope of what that will mean.'

Raldoron had kept his doubts buried, but now they returned with force and he struggled to accept the dark possibility they represented. If Warmaster Horus had sent the Blood Angels to Signus knowing full well what they were to face, if he had done this with the collusion of Lorgar and his Word Bearers… then two Legions now stood in treachery's shadow. *And perhaps more,* he thought. *The Thousand Sons, already in rebellion for their own cause? The Dark Angels or the Alpha Legion, both ever seeking their own agendas? Who would side with the Warmaster, if it came down to schism?*

He shook off the bleak thoughts before they could gain momentum, and he found the Angel watching him. Sanguinius nodded grimly. 'Yes. It pulls at one's reason, doesn't it? More than the strange phenomena we have encountered in recent days.' He sighed, and Raldoron saw that fleeting sorrow once more. 'I have regrets, my son. And I fear that there will not be time enough to undo the fate that awaits us all.' Then the instant passed, and Sanguinius brandished the great sword. 'We will fight the battle in front of us and then return to seek out Horus. And I will know the truth in that moment.' He saluted with the blade. 'Give the command. We go north. To the war.'

From the flanks of the *Red Tear*, a rush of windblown sand kicked up into the air as flyers and transports and the boots of thousands of Space Marines moved forth across the blasted landscape of Signus Prime. Predator battle tanks and grav-attack vehicles, speeders and jetbikes formed the tip of the formation, while mobile carriers took heavy support units, Dreadnought talons and Terminator divisions by the hundred. Matching their numbers, Blood Angels squads in serried rows advanced at a swift march. They broke out toward the distant enemy stronghold, the dull sunlight flashing off bared blades and ready bolters.

Assault units buoyed on screaming thunder-jet backpacks ate up the distance in long, loping jumps powered by flashes of yellow fire – and at their lead, the elite companies marshalled around the gold and white of the primarch and his honour guard.

Sanguinius drew his sword, and a full-throated cheer rippled down the length of his army like a great wave breaking across a shore.

The enemy answered by opening the gates to hell.

From the walls of the distant cathedral-city, out of the thickening miasma of the cloying white haze, an army of the unknown advanced across the Plains of the Damned, and the bleached sands turned black in their footprints. A host of battle the like of which had never been fought by humankind revealed itself. It had no aircraft, no armoured vehicles, no machines of war in the way that a warrior of the Legiones Astartes would think of them. Instead, this army had beasts borne out of black legend. Monsters and fiends, for there was no other way to describe them. Manticores and chimerae, hellions and harriers, ogres and trolls, succubae and death's-heads – hundreds of thousands of dark spirits ripped from countless generations of terrifying legend, the spawn of the fears of the human heart cast from soiled meat and corrupted bone. Living, screaming, baying for the blood of the Blood Angels.

The warp's great army outnumbered the warriors of the Legion by thousands, even with the representation of battle-brothers from almost every single company of the mighty Three Hundred. At the fore, running wild and mad at the behest of the beasts, there were the last living remnants of the people of Signus. These ones believed that they were, in some arcane manner, *blessed*. These were men and women who had given themselves fully and completely to the Ruinous Powers, many before the full invasion from the warp had even begun.

Some of them had kept their dark cults secret for generations, hiding in bleak places and smothering the foul light of their beliefs in the face of the secular truth of the Emperor and his Great Crusade. Imagine their joy when the emissary of the night had come to them and told them to prepare for a new rebirth. Their illegal religion was suddenly blazing anew across the planets and moons of the Signus Cluster.

When the strange and the fearful came, they knew what it was, when Bruja came in his carriage of lies, they knew. They were *happy*.

These were the men and women who had led their unheeding families, their neighbours and comrades like sheep to the factories retooled to be slaughterworks. These were the ones who drank deep of the bile of newborn daemons and willingly accepted the invasion of warp spawn, not just into their universe and their worlds, but into their *flesh*.

These were the willing vassals of Kyriss's army, who wanted more than anything to be ridden like mounts, to give themselves to become skin-proxy to undying predators from the immaterium. And with this in mind, and songs made of forbidden words on their lips, they ran forth to choke the guns of the

Blood Angels.

The enraptured cultists and turned psyker-slaves had guns and arcane weapons, blades and shatter-bombs and a hundred other ways to kill and maim. A horizontal rain of bolter fire and shrieking plasma met their advance and cut them down, ripping flesh into ribbons or ashing it with greasy chugs of meat-smoke. The warriors of the IX Legion took first blood on Signus Prime, as was their right and their intent. They committed to the fight without hesitation; it had been long enough, and they were hungry for it. Too much skulking in the shadows, too much waiting and watching and weathering attacks from the hidden. The Blood Angels unchained their controlled fury and released it by waves, battling the tide of spite and frenzy.

Ranks of Terminators, combi-bolters howling, cut down the second and third wave of the cultists, thinning their numbers still further. Rocket salvos from hundreds of man-portable launchers briefly darkened the sallow sky as their smoky contrails arced overhead and fell into the enemy deployment. Rippling black spheres of smoke and fire gouged craters in the dead sands and consumed everything within their reach.

Most of the cultists died in thrall to their obscene madness, reduced to dust and flecks of bone; those rare ones that did not perish were all immediately taken by base intelligences from the warp, little-minds no more advanced than animal apex predators found on any one of thousands of colonised worlds. Flexing and stretching in this new existence, they remade the meat they wore into innovative forms that would please their masters and disgust the eyes of men.

The attack elements landed with crashes of ceramite against stone, weapons snarling as they fired into the throng of the foe. The primarch bounded to the top of a low rise, swinging his blade to cut through the neck of a yellow-skinned fiend; the creature resembled some merging of insect, bovine and human, a whipping scorpion's tail quivering as its fleshy head fell to the dust. Azkaellon and Halkryn were at his sides, their Angelus bolters blazing righteous fire.

Slits opened in the ground nearby, and from beneath the dead sands a buzzing, writhing cloud of shimmering black motes emerged. Swarms of dark battle-flies were vomited into the air, the sound of their myriad beating wings harsh and grating on the ears of the legionaries. They dallied over the dead to feed, then swept down toward the Blood Angels.

Sanguinius did not need to give voice to the command; his warriors had already been made ready for such an attack. The Angel simply pointed, and his legionaries did the rest. Lines of high-pressure flamers and plasma guns turned on the swarms and spouted infernos into the air. With a noise like human screams, the insects perished, and krak grenades were sent into the vents in the earth to seal them shut.

The primarch came about as the sound of snarling, canine fury met him. From the fog of war came beasts that resembled dogs, but ones created by the mind of a tortured madman. These great flesh-hounds were dripping with fluid, as if they had been skinned alive, and spines of sharpened black bone emerged from their torsos. Eyes red and bright as lasers glared out over fanged maws filled with an impossible number of teeth. Each hellhound was the size of an unarmoured legionary, and they threw themselves at the assaulting troopers, biting clean through ceramite or clamping their monstrous jaws about the heads of those too slow to avoid their death-leap.

The Angel speared one, running it through to half the great sword's length, then bifurcated another before the first had even slid apart from his blade. Azkaellon bolted forward, and jammed the muzzle

of his wrist-gun into the neck of a hellhound that had knocked down a warrior from Lorator Squad. A single bloodshard round beheaded it and the body fell away. Incredibly, it still had animation, walking around in circles. Mendrion came from out of nowhere and stamped it into a red slurry.

The waves of attack gave no quarter, and with each surge new and more unspeakable horrors joined the freakish mass blockading the smoke-shrouded cathedral. Next came flying things, the furies that resembled bats or hawks or some abhorrent, reptilian-like fusion of the two. Sanguinius and those with jump packs across their backs rose into the air to meet the airborne horde, gun and blade flashing as plasteel met flesh over and over. Polluted blood and pieces of meat rained down on the engagement below in cascades of wet gore.

A wing of jetbikes blew through the mass of the aerial fight, their heavy bolters hammering, swiftly followed by a chariot on droning grav-motors. A legionary on the open platform panned a beam cannon across the sky, immolating any of the furies that strayed into his fire zone. Bodies fizzed and melted.

A dozen of the creatures fell on the winged primarch at once, hoping to take him by surprise, but he twisted in the air, his wings extending to their full reach. The pinions slammed into the creatures and knocked them aside; with the sword and the golden fingers of his gauntlet, Sanguinius cleaved bodies and crushed throats. He let gravity take him back to the ground, and there a keening wail broke around him.

The Angel turned to see a lithe figure of what resembled female proportions, taller even than he, moving across the sands in steps that resembled a dance. The body of the woman-form was draped in shimmering silks and her head was lost in the gloom of a hood. Thin, corpse-pale arms emerged from the diaphanous robes, their hands pressed to the hidden face. Sanguinius was briefly reminded of the Acolyte Kreed's astropath, but he knew without doubt that poor Corocoro Sahzë was long dead. This creation was something far more foul.

It howled like a widow, a poisonous lament-song oozing into his ears. Then, from the depths of the robes, other identical arms emerged – one more, then two, then four. Each fingertip ended in a tiny human eye, each palm had a mouth with which to scream. The widow's limbs flexed and spun, opening in gestures of embrace. Tears flicked from the spread hands, and where they landed they burned like acid.

Halkryn snarled with pain as a fleck of the fluid caressed his vambrace and sizzled through the gold sheath; another warrior, a son from the 48th, died screaming as the corrosive tears ate away his face and into his skull. Others fell with similar injuries, brought low by the tears of this witch-thing.

'No,' spat Sanguinius, and vaulted forward, his mighty blade turning in a wheel of red. Lightning from distant guns flashed off his armour as he closed the distance with the widow. It screamed from its cowled face and biting mouths, fingers growing pearlescent talons with which to slash and slice. The Angel cut away the flesh-hounds that gathered in packs to bar his approach, even as the screaming creature danced and writhed across the sands, trying to stay beyond his reach.

Then he was upon the widow, and the red blade rolled in his hands, becoming a rising and falling arc of shimmering plasteel. The Angel severed the claws in one great sweep, six stumps spurting oily matter; the hands fell to the dust and skittered away like panicked spiders. He crushed them beneath his boots as the creature at last showed its face to him. There, beneath the hood, was a skein of pallid flesh covered with human eyes and devoid of all other features.

Sanguinius grabbed a fist of the shining silks as it turned and tried to flee, pulling the widow back

off its sinuous legs. He drew his ornate infernus pistol and pressed it to the creature's neck. 'Weep no more,' he said, and executed it with a single shot.

He stepped away from the kill and cast about, finding his Sanguinary Guard close at hand, each engaged in the killing of another such obscenity. Clawed seductress daemonettes and more of the hoofed fiends were coming at their lines, whooping and hollering in unnatural chorus. The lines of battle between the Blood Angels and enemy were mingled now, the clash surging back and forth as the opposing forces battled for supremacy, gaining and losing ground from moment to moment.

The primarch gave a cold smile, feeling the charge of battle-anger ignite deep inside him, sensing the same deadly rage in the hearts of his warriors; the Blood Angels were pressing back the freakish defenders of the great stronghold, breaking their attack with ruthless, unflinching martial prowess. Whatever the origins of these bestial horrors might be, they could die all the same – and the sons of Sanguinius knew how to deal death like no others.

For an instant, his gaze fell again upon the hellish citadel erected on the blighted landscape, and he recalled the words of the creature Kyriss. *The Cathedral of the Mark*. That had been the name the monster had given to this place, and true to that description there was a sigil of immense size cut into the towers that showed itself to the Legion. Again, he saw the star of eight as burned into dead Phorus, visible among the wreckage on Scoltrum, etched into the hulls of the hell-ships over Signus Prime, marked on the countless numbers of boneless corpses they had come across since the falling of the veil.

'The bones…' A cold, slaughterhouse wind swept over Sanguinius and his wings flexed, rising in the gust. He was aware of Azkaellon and Zuriel coming to his side, their armour flashing.

'My lord?'

'The bones,' he repeated, and now the primarch was sure of what he saw. He nodded toward the arching, rough-hewn towers of the blood-smeared cathedral, a grim understanding settling in his heart. 'Look, Azkaellon. The mystery of the millions dead is now answered.'

The Guard Commander scowled as he came to the same understanding. 'I see it, master.'

The Cathedral of the Mark had not been constructed from stones and mortar, nor ferrocrete and plasteel. Every metre of its towers, every span and archway was built out of bleached human bone, cemented with fat and gristle. The skeletons of dead Signusi citizens, drawn from every planet and moon in the cluster, from common child to elder noble, gathered here to become the raw material for this atrocity.

'What black heart could ever conceive of this?' Disgust choked Zuriel's words.

'You will know,' vowed the Angel, 'when I cut it from the chest of our foe.'

They deployed from the Phobos under cover of the Land Raider's heavy lascannons, the searing white spears of light sizzling through the misted air and into the defences of the enemy.

The daemons. Meros had trouble pushing the name from his thoughts. It had lodged there like a splinter and he could not expunge it.

'Forward!' shouted Cassiel, aiming with his plasma gun. 'Forward for the Ninth and the Legion!'

The rest of the squad echoed the sergeant's cry and stormed from the shadow of the tank, joining the advance of their company into the fray. Up ahead, Meros caught a glimpse of Captain Furio brandishing his honour-shield and the power sword that was his signature weapon. The Apothecary had his chainaxe revving and ready, his bolt pistol cocked and loaded.

Sarga had his helmet off, his hair loose in a wild mane, and his teeth bared in a snarl. He grinned at his comrade, pulling away as he drew his bolter to his shoulder. Nearby, Leyteo and the Techmarine, Kaide, were doing the same, pacing their first few shots into the enemy line. They were a handful of warriors among many thousands, a single element amid phalanxes of red-armoured legionaries; but still the battle seemed like it belonged to them alone.

Meros joined his brothers, peering through the tele-optics of his helm to track the oncoming rush of a gnarled, horned fiend, its claws snapping and tail whipping angrily about. The target lock seemed to slide off the creature as it moved, unable to gain solid purchase. He grimaced and put a trio of bolt shells into it with dead reckoning, blowing off a limb with a lucky hit.

The beast released a strident, whinnying skirl and beat its hooves toward him, lowering its head and the barbed, dripping stinger on its tail. Clouds of soporific pheromone spray misted the air, jetting from glands on the creature's back. It moved faster than he expected, butting aside legionaries in the rank ahead of him. Black, pupil-less eyes glared at Meros, and the legionary knew it wanted to kill him.

He kept firing, and suddenly the shouts of his pistol were joined by the voices of a dozen more bolters. Unable to halt its headlong charge, the fiend ran into the kill zone and was blown apart.

Meros threw a glance over his shoulder to see who had aided him and found a skull-mask glaring back. The Warden, Annellus, spared him a nod; standing with the warrior in black were Redknife and his Space Wolves, the muzzles of their guns still smoking.

The captain walked past and gave the dead monster a desultory kick. 'They die easily enough. Stinks like spoiled meat, though.' Already, the fiend's flesh was softening, becoming gooey and molten. A strange, perfumed vapour rose off it, curling away into the air as if something were escaping from the prison of its cooling corpse. The body decayed with sickening rapidity, like all the other enemy dead. Robbed of the grotesque life-energy that animated them, they disintegrated almost immediately. It almost felt like it wasn't a kill at all.

'Stay with the advance,' snapped the Warden, and Meros moved with the group, his battle-brothers cresting a low ridge a short distance ahead.

The shaven-headed Space Wolf, the one with the skin covered in runic tattoos and arcane symbols, shook a knurled staff in his hand and said something in Fenrisian. The words were unclear but the tone revealed enough. *A warning*, he thought.

Meros followed the skald's gesture and felt the ground tremble under him. Through the mist, a massive shape easily the girth of a Rhino transport was approaching, lurching from side to side on thick, flexible legs. Light blinked off dirty, blood-smeared brass. It moved fast, advancing by bounds.

The thing resembled a deep ocean cephalopod, but that was only Meros's mind grasping toward the nearest logical equivalent in his thoughts. Thick rounded body segments slick with mucus protruded at wrong angles through plates of metal strapped about its girth, and there were odd numbers of legs that stamped and cut the ground. Vestigial wings and quivering antennae buzzed at nothing, and its powerful bulk swung this way and that, knocking down warriors with violent flicks of motion. Blood Angels went flying as it ploughed into them. It did not have a head and neck; the amalgam of bilious skin and muscle ended in a stump, and on that wedge of meat there were dozens of lop-sided mouths with dagger teeth and beards of stinger-fronds.

It was suddenly upon them, ploughing through their advance, and Meros leaped out of its way. He fired as he ran, unloading the rest of the shells in his pistol clip into the glutinous flanks of the

monster, and when the slide locked back, he made desperate cuts at a flailing tentacle-leg with the braying head of his axe. Oily matter choked the spinning teeth and the limb was cut, dropping to the sands to slither and twitch where it fell.

Meros was aware of one of the Space Wolves nearby, but then another sinuous feeler broke the skin of the creature with a wet pop and lashed out at them. The Apothecary was hit and he saw the world turn around him. He struck the ground and felt gore spray across his face. He scrambled back to his feet, spinning about to see the beast pull the unlucky Space Wolf apart, ripping off a leg and an arm as a callous child might pull the wings from a fly. He shook off the blurring of his thoughts and heard the flat concussion of a bolter firing on full automatic. A few steps away, Sarga shouted in wordless rage as he poured shells into the snapping, hooting mouths of the creature. Great chunks of sizzling, rotten meat blew out of the creature's torso as the mass-reactive rounds punctured it and exploded inside dense, gelatinous flesh.

But Sarga didn't see the other leg-snakes swarming up toward him, lost in the flash and fury of the bolter's shrieking muzzle flare. Meros shouted his name, but it was too late. One tentacle struck like a serpent, coiling about Sarga's thigh; another, skin at the tip peeling back to reveal a serrated bone arrowhead, came up behind him and plunged down into his neck.

Blood fountained from the wound, from Sarga's lips, and his body stiffened. The tentacle lashed and spun him about, thrashing inside the cavity of his body before letting him go. Meros's battle-brother went down on his chest, the sand beneath him quickly becoming rusty mud.

The white light of a lascannon shot came from somewhere else in the Blood Angels attack line and burned a crater in the flanks of the monster. It screamed loud and high, then rolled away, dragging itself back toward its own kind on what limbs it still had. Meros let it go, running to Sarga's side, turning him over. His comrade's face was a ruin of cuts, his grinning mouth now a savaged parody of what it had once been.

And yet he still lived, although the span would not be long. Sarga's eyes flicked to the Apothecary as Meros bent over him. He spoke, and pink spittle frothed from his ragged lips. 'Brother,' he managed.

A shadow fell over them, and somehow Meros knew who it would be.

'His wound is grave,' said Annellus, with an executioner's solemnity.

Meros paid no heed to the Warden and bent low over his fallen squadmate, the sounds of close battle fading from his ears. 'Brother,' he said, giving voice to the most difficult task of his cadre. 'Do you desire peace?'

Sarga nodded, and it was an effort. 'I… will live on,' he said, the words almost a question.

A slender silver needle – the medicae carnifex – slid soundlessly from Meros's medicae gauntlet. 'You will live on,' he told his brother. The Apothecary placed the point upon Sarga's flesh where it would make the mercy kill most swiftly, and did the deed cleanly. The legionary died with a low gasp then there was the business of recovery, and Meros set about it with mechanical, careful precision. In moments, he had harvested Sarga's gene-rich progenoid glands from his corpse and secured them for later return to the home world.

Sarga's genetic legacy would survive. Still, that was hollow comfort to his comrade, as Meros stood up, locking his sorrow away.

Annellus had watched him through the whole process. 'The time to mourn our brothers will come later. For now, take solace in the fact that he gave himself in service of the Legion, in the Emperor's

name.'

The colourless platitude ground on Meros's choler and he turned on the Warden, an angry riposte forming on his lips, but he never uttered it.

A colossal impact sounded across the battleground, as loud as the concussion of a field cannon; something huge had fallen from the sky amidst the deepest concentration of the fighting. Meros looked toward the clash, glimpsing the flicker of angelic wings and golden armour.

Smoke was rising in a thick black pillar, and in the churn of it, the Apothecary saw glimpses of a towering form, of massive dragon wings, barbed black horns and chains of shimmering silver.

Meros broke into a run, sprinting toward the leading edge of the battle line, obeying the raw primal instinct that told him that he and all his brothers would be needed to meet this new foe.

Every warrior on the *Red Tear*'s battlements bled anger and frustration into the auras of their thoughts to such a degree that Kano could sense it even without trying. He walked stiffly away from the warriors in the hastily-assembled missile pit, trying to put their thoughts out of his mind. Grim-faced, he marched along the northern face of the grounded battle-barge, watching the light of the distant engagement.

Kano knew without looking back that the legionaries at the cannon were brothers of the 221st Company, and they looked upon the duty of guarding the base with the same dislike as he. The warrior also knew that it would take little for him to press deeper, draw their names and memories from their surface thoughts. The skill and power were still inside him, even without the guidance of his psychic hood to harness it. The encounter with the hell-creature, the horror of its mind-touch on his psyche, had reminded him of that.

He hesitated, reaching out an arm to steady himself on an exhaust vane. The optics of his helmet could easily bring the fight to him if he wished to use them, but he had no need. The telepathic farsight he had once used in the Emperor's name would do far better, it would place him there in the thick while his physical form remained here.

Kano had that power, and more. It seemed foolish to deny it. *Foolish–*

'No!' The denial snapped from his lips and he shook the thought away. Where had this sudden doubt come from? After so many months in obedience to the edict, after swearing to Legion and primarch never again to use his preternatural skills, why now did Kano find his resolve beginning to crumble?

He closed his eyes and withdrew into his own thoughts. *It is this place,* he told himself. *These worlds*. They were tainted by forces that hid behind the curtain of the visible. Insidious powers worked upon him, even as he stood here. Perhaps the daemon-thing on the ship had deliberately let him live for that very reason. Perhaps it was the whisper-voice on the vox, forever there even when comm-links were disconnected.

'I will not give you a foothold,' he said to the air.

As if in answer, a kind of silence fell about him. Not the death of sound, not so literal – but a sudden tranquillity in his thoughts, a stillness that he had not known before.

'My lord?' A woman's voice. 'You are Brother Kano?'

He turned to find a slight, pale female with henna-red hair and a fearful look upon her face. Standing behind her was a loose group of humans, clad in cast-off crewman's clothes and other scraps.

'You shouldn't be out here,' he said immediately. 'It isn't safe.'

‘It’s not safe anywhere!’ spat a gruff, thuggish man. Kano eyed him and tried to gain a read, but he felt nothing. It was like losing a sense, but not so shocking or painful, only peaceful.

‘I am Tillyan Niobe and we are the survivors from Scoltrum. Brother Meros spoke of you,’ the woman went on. ‘He told me you would keep us safe.’

It is her. Kano’s eyes narrowed. The silent aura was centred upon Niobe, as if she were the eye of an inverse storm, and suddenly it was clear to him. He could read nothing of her, only a psychic void that drew in the tele-pathic hush like a black hole trapped starlight.

‘Tillyan,’ he said. ‘Do you know this word? *Pariah*?’

Her brow furrowed. Was she about to lie? It was difficult to be certain. ‘No, lord. I don’t understand–’

‘I do,’ he replied. ‘Do you know why you survived while all others did not?’

She blinked. ‘The daemons did not see us.’

He shook his head. ‘They did not see *you*.’

Sanguinius beheld a beast.

Eldritch ebon smoke coiled around a muscled torso of angry red flesh, the twitching chest and flexing arms barely contained by coils of brass links and battered bronze armour. Wicked black horns rose from an ever-snarling face that was the very expression of feral hatred, bared fangs yellow and dripping open to the air. The arrival had come like a comet, riding a plume of ash from the ruined sky above, and yet the primarch instinctively sensed that it was a creature of the underworld rather than the heavens. He had seen the old books of lore that filled the secret libraries of his father’s palace; he knew the myths of brutes and devils from the superstitious past of humankind. The humanoid that rose up before him was the dread of those long-dead men, more real and more terrible than they could ever have imagined.

It spoke, leering at the Angel. ‘Have you enjoyed the match so far, golden one?’ The voice was like bubbling magma. ‘So many pieces spent and yet so far to go before we reach the endgame.’ It cast a sly look at the dead ranged all around them, the bodies of legionary, cultist and monster alike. ‘But then, we both adore the taste of blood, do we not?’

‘You speak as if you know me,’ growled the primarch. ‘But I see only a monster to be killed.’

‘Recognise me, then, Sanguinius of Baal.’ It laughed. ‘I am Ka’Bandha, Bloodthirster and general of Khorne, blessed is his hate.’ The creature gave a mocking bow. ‘And we are brothers.’

Meros emptied his pistol into a pack of screeching furies and reloaded, vaulting impact craters in the blood-soaked sand as he closed on the core of the battle. He skidded down an incline and staggered to a halt. A cluster of warriors stood with weapons ready, many of them legionaries of Raldoron’s First Company. He saw the captain and the gold-armoured Sanguinary Guard, packs of Terminators from Squads Saevin and Mecallus, and before them the crimson form of Venerable Leonatus, banners snapping from the Dreadnought’s adamantium flanks.

All of them were waiting, and across the span of the battle line the Apothecary saw the enemy array in similar pause. Packs of black-furred dogs and the lizard-wolf hellhounds he had already encountered panted and pawed at the mud, alongside crested humanoids with horned skulls and rusted swords. The ravagers grunted and salivated, kneading the grips of their blades in anticipation of their master’s command.

Their master. It shocked Meros to look upon the hellish figure, this Bloodthirster. He heard it speak, felt the tremor in the air at the beating of the dark wings across its back. For a moment, it seemed as if a nightmarish mirror had been held before the Angel, and this black reflection exposed as the polar opposite to all that was noble and good in him.

'Why do you fight us?' it asked, cocking its head, looking at the casualties of war. 'We are alike. We each know the joy of bloodshed. The sweet taste of the kill.' The creature took a step forward, brandishing its weapons – a lengthy whip of coiled brass and an axe that seemed fashioned from the jawbone of a leviathan. 'Khorne is power beyond measuring. Chaos is the end-state of all existence. You resist and merely prolong the inevitable.' The stone-grind of the voice set the Blood Angel's teeth on edge, as if he could hear it through the resonance in his bones. 'Even your Emperor-Father knows this. It is why he hides from us. It is why he is *afraid*.'

Meros saw the lightning-flash of anger in the primarch's eyes, the barb striking home; but then Sanguinius smiled. 'Get out of my way, animal, or I will cut you down,' he told the beast. 'I will deal only with your master, the one called Kyriss.'

The stygian smoke wreathing the daemon rippled with sudden anger. 'That sense-whore is not my master,' it raged. 'I answer only to Khorne! I am the warlord of this place!'

'You are nothing to me,' said the Angel, and he attacked.

Star-forged metal struck iron-shod bone with a thunderous crack. Sword and axe crossed one another, throwing out fans of sparks. The daemon was fast, quicker than Sanguinius expected, twisting the weapon and reversing the swing. The axe slashed low, cutting through the ground toward his legs.

The Angel vaulted backwards into the air and spread his wings, sails of white feathers crackling as he spun about his axis, dancing out of range of the blow. He turned the red blade in his grip, and with martial grace traced the tip across the beast's howling face. It cut deep.

The primarch landed solidly, but gave Ka'Bandha no time to recover. He intended to keep his promise. The Angel bolted forwards, but the daemon was ready for him. The brassy whip shrieked, tearing through the air toward his torso. Sanguinius's wings snapped close to his shoulders and he ducked low, the barbed lashes passing over his head. Still moving, still leading with his sword, he jabbed wide, forcing the bestial warlord into defence.

Ka'Bandha roared and refused to sway, instead bringing the axe up to parry each probing attack, giving the Angel no point of entry past his guard. They were in the heart of the melee now, the battle around them screaming full-throated as lesser daemons – the harriers, devil-dogs and ravagers – fought legionaries, Dreadnoughts and Terminators.

Sanguinius's innate agility gave him an edge against the Bloodthirster's raw brutal power, but they were well matched and by turns each scored small, significant wounds upon the other. Feathers caught by the snap of the axe fell away from the Angel's wings as they circled and charged one another.

With a thunderous bellow, Ka'Bandha reeled back and threw out a blow with his whip, the fanged tips cracking as they arced toward the primarch's face. Sanguinius pivoted, faster than thought, and caught the barbs in his free hand. The lash writhed as if it were a living thing, coiling around his wrist, cracking the ceramite sheath of his gauntlet.

He gave a violent tug and pulled the daemon off balance, leading a hammer-blow punch with the pommel of his blade that shattered tusks and drew torrents of Ka'Bandha's black blood.

The beast stumbled backwards, at first hissing, then laughing. 'You fight well,' it said, spitting out

broken teeth. ‘No ephemeral has ever cut me before. But I cannot be bested. Why do you try? Join us instead! You are a creature of blood as much as I am… You already walk the scarlet path, little angel, we both know it. Come witness Khorne’s full glory, embrace what lies within you. You could be so exalted, a champion.’

Sanguinius sneered. ‘First the other one, now you. Are all your kind so in love with the sounds of your own voice?’ He slashed at the creature, knocking it back, drawing an angry yowl.

‘A curse on you, then!’ spat the daemonic warlord. ‘If you refuse my offer, then know this: I will destroy all that you hold dear and plague your sons for as long as your Legion exists!’

‘That is no threat,’ said the primarch. ‘My sons will always be ready to kill your kind, until the death of the last star in the heavens!’

Ka’Bandha gave a wordless shout of anger, shouldering aside a stalled Rhino, flipping the armoured transport onto its roof. He exploded towards the Angel, howling like a banshee.

A figure in golden armour with wings of silver flashed at the edge of the primarch’s vision, and to his horror he saw the Rhino come down on Brother Lohgos, crushing him into the ground and killing him instantly. Sanguinius shouted in fury, feeling a palpable jolt of phantom pain as his trusted honour guard died.

He felt the death as though it were a piece of his soul cut away and burned like paper; he felt *every* death. The shock of it, distant or close, weak or strong, but always there. Each time a son of Sanguinius fell, it was like a cut upon his flesh, a feather torn from his wings.

Did the others feel the losses of their sons so keenly? Did Dorn or Vulkan? Magnus or Perturabo?

Horus?

Ka’Bandha came at him, arms wide, intent to flatten him into the dust. The Angel closed the gate on all other thoughts and threw himself into the air, letting his wings unfurl. He easily avoided the daemon-lord’s wild assault, but only for a moment. The beast had wings of its own, and they opened in kind, beating a clarion as black smoke swirled around them.

It came up after him, and they collided, brass and bronze clashing with gold and ceramite. Sanguinius raked his weapon across the creature’s chest, cutting deeply. He hacked at Ka’Bandha’s wrist-guard, forcing the daemon to lose its grip on the bone-axe.

They twisted in mid-flight, raining blows upon one another, each punch landing with enough kinetic force to send out thunder-cracks of displaced air. Sanguinius felt armour that had weathered a thousand wars fracture and split beneath the deadly impacts of the daemon warlord’s strikes. Ka’Bandha’s foetid maw opened wide and snapped at his face, hellish eyes bereft of all but fury and bloodlust boring into him.

The combatants were spinning back toward the ground now, falling uncontrolled towards the raging battle below. Gravity had them in its grasp, and even the Angel’s mighty wings could not arrest the plunge.

Instead, he gave in to it. With a growl of effort, Sanguinius pulled on the chains about Ka’Bandha’s thick throat and closed the distance between them. Before the daemon could react, he had buried the full length of his sword in its chest.

With strength borne of pain, the creature swatted him away and they parted company a split-second before striking the ground.

It was the Angel who stood first. Bloody and panting, he rose and drew up his sword, even as Ka’Bandha writhed in the mud, barking out sounds of frenzied agony.

He advanced, raising the red blade to find the killing blow.

'Wait,' Ka'Bandha's clawed hand lifted, but the primarch did not halt. 'Before you strike, know this.' The daemon pulled itself to a kneeling position, clutching at the ruined meat of its torso. 'We will never lie to you, little angel. That is not the way of Khorne. We are the truth of blood, and that truth is, *Horus has betrayed you*!'

And for one, fractional moment, a greater pain than any other touched the heart of Sanguinius. His sword dipped, his vision clouded. 'No,' he insisted. '*No*!'

It was enough; Ka'Bandha moved like lightning, the barbs of his whip coming from out of nowhere. Striking like vipers, the lashes cracked against the primarch's legs with monstrous force and crushed them, knocking him to the ground. The Angel's cry of agony echoed across the battlefield.

The daemon's laughter smothered the sound. 'You defied me, and now I will give you a wound that will forever fester,' he vowed. Bolter fire from squads of Blood Angels coming to their master's aid whined off his brass armour, but he paid no heed to them.

Sanguinius fought against titanic waves of agony, grasping for his fallen sword. The beast had turned his kinship with Horus against him; his uncertainty forged the moment of doubt, the careless instant that allowed Ka'Bandha to strike him down. 'Try if you will!' he spat.

The daemon's face twisted in amusement. 'You misunderstand,' it told him, gathering up its fallen axe. A baleful light, a glowing crimson mist, formed around the cutting edge. 'I know how to cut you deeper than any blow ever would.'

There were hundreds of legionaries storming across the mud, righteous anger propelling them forward, burning with the need to avenge this attack against their master. Sanguinius felt the emotion coming from them in waves. He saw their faces, heard their names ring in his ears. At the lead, steadfast Nakir, his captain of the bold 24th Company; and with him Gravato and Madidus, Perada and Ferveus and Eremin and Carrick and countless more, each of whom he knew like a son.

'*No*!' He tried to warn them off, his wounded legs resisting him as he attempted to stand, but Ka'Bandha was already running into them, conjuring a red fire from the air, a haze that burned like pure fury.

The daemon's axe rose; and when it fell, a new crimson sun came to life in the middle of the battleground. A *ragefire* broke, and in the halls of his mind, a father heard five hundred of his sons perish at once.

Then darkness claimed the Angel, the backlash of psychic shock spiralling after him into the abyss of his soul.

NIKAEA

‘This will not end well,’ said Captain Thoros. The words were almost a whisper, more the escape of an ill-concealed thought than an actual utterance.

Raldoron glanced at his pale-skinned companion and halted in the middle of the rough, black-walled lava tunnel. ‘Brother?’ he prompted.

Thoros hesitated and his sallow cheeks took on a flicker of colour as he realised his error. ‘Forgive me, First Captain. I spoke out of turn.’

‘Speak your mind if you will,’ Raldoron insisted.

The other officer shook his head. ‘Not here.’ He glanced around the volcanic passageway. ‘Not now.’

Raldoron wavered on the cusp of making it an order, but Thoros beat him to it. ‘The transports need to be prepared for the Angel’s departure,’ he said. ‘I’ll set to the task.’ Before he could say more, Thoros set off down a branching passageway, heading toward the landing quadrant that had been cut into the volcanic ash fields beyond the cinder cone that rose above them.

The First Captain frowned, and walked on. He passed servitors and warriors from other Legions, all of them engaged in the matters of withdrawal from the surface of Nikaea. None of them had reason to remain now.

The function of this place was at an end, and Raldoron wondered what would happen to it after they were gone. The gargantuan volcano had been tamed by the power and technology of Imperial might, the living rock and roiling magma cut back and dammed so that the Emperor and his sons could come into the heart of this place and walk the spaces within without threat of destruction. There was something bluntly symbolic about it, a deliberate and engineered statement to all who had come here. No matter how powerful, unknowable and furious the elements of nature might seem, the Imperium could tame them at a whim.

But was that hubris? Once the legionaries and their servants were gone, the field generators and gravity-walls would be deactivated and Nikaea’s burning mountain would assert its strength once more. The rocky chambers cut by melta-beam into domicile, anteroom and amphitheatre would be engulfed by lava, reclaimed by the fires. It would be as if no one had ever set foot here.

But even if Nikaea remained untouched, the shockwave of what had happed here would change *everything else*. It was not an exaggeration, Raldoron reflected, to suggest that the words spoken on this day would affect every other world in the Imperium.

At first, Raldoron had been honoured to accept the duty of accompanying his primarch to the Emperor’s gathering; Azkaellon had, predictably, not seen the sense of it, but the Angel knew it would mean more to arrive among his great brothers not just with the golden seraphs of his Sanguinary Guard, but among the host of his most elite warriors. Raldoron’s pride swelled; the chance to represent his Legion and his company in the presence of several primarchs and the Emperor himself… Many Blood Angels went for centuries without ever having such an opportunity.

He felt differently now. The glory of the moment was tarnished by a bleak cloud of ill-mood that permeated through every chamber, repeated in the eyes of every face he saw. Raldoron had hoped Nikaea would be a place of concord and unity, as the Emperor wished. Instead, he felt the sword point of division had been laid here. Legionaries were guarded now, more so than before, even within his own Legion, as Thoros’s example clearly showed.

In the aftermath, the first vessel to leave was the *Photep*, the warship that belonged to the primarch of the Thousand Sons. By unspoken rule, the protocol was that it should have been the Emperor’s

conveyance, but the *Imperator Somnium* still lingered in high orbit. No one spoke against Magnus the Red as he swept from the amphitheatre, his mien as crimson as his name. The First Captain remembered the moment clearly. His gaze had turned to his primarch, and Raldoron recalled the brief sorrow he saw in Sanguinius's eyes.

Raldoron had seen the Angel show that face before. On Melchior, when confronted by Warmaster Horus; and in his sanctum aboard the *Red Tear*, on the day he had confided a great secret to a handful of his chosen sons.

Magnus was gone, and vanished in his wake was the gift that he had first brought to the Legiones Astartes. It was the Crimson King, in partnership with the Angel and the Khan, who had originally gathered to bring the ideal of the Librarius to the Legions. Magnus, Sanguinius and Jaghatai argued for – and won – a place for psychics within the Legions. The Librarians made the suspect powers of witchery into weapons of war… and for a time that had been enough.

Many, who were not yet willing to accept the use of shackled psykers as Navigators and astropaths, took discomfort at the idea of psychic warriors. Some Legions eschewed the principle in its totality, others bordered on open hostility to the concept. In the end, it did not matter. What had been seen as a boon was gradually recast as a weakness, a threat, a vector through which the vagaries of the warp might unbalance a Legion.

They brought Magnus the Red to Nikaea to challenge him for his reckless exploration of the depthless halls of the immaterium; they spoke of secrets not meant to be known, of vile sorcery and paths to ruination taken by avaricious and unwary minds. In the end, it had been less for the questioning and more as a trial of the Crimson King's intentions.

Magnus was gone, and so were the Librarians. Raldoron heard the words of the Emperor's decree with his own ears. '*It is my will that no Legion will maintain a Librarius department. All its warriors and instructors must be returned to the battle companies and never again employ any psychic powers.*' With that edict given voice, the demand could not be un-made. It was done.

Thoros was right. The day had not gone smoothly, and these events would not end well. Even a blind man could have reckoned the resistance of the Thousand Sons to the orders from Magnus's father, and while it was anathema for Captain Raldoron to even consider defiance of an Imperial edict, he knew that others would not be so circumspect.

And what of my master? He asked himself the question as he passed through a fork in the tunnel and approached the chamber that had been set aside for use by the IX Legion. *What are the Angel's thoughts on the Emperor's choice?*

The warriors at the great copper doors saluted the First Captain and gave him entrance. Inside, he did not find answers, only more questions.

'Is it true?' Captain Amit turned toward him, pushing through the half-dozen servitors in the process of packing up the primarch's travelling gear. 'Tell me that it isn't true, Raldoron.'

The other officer scowled. 'The command is to be obeyed,' he snapped. 'Had you been up there, you would have heard the Emperor say as much himself.'

'But I was not,' Amit replied. 'I was commanded to stand sentinel at this chamber. And perhaps with good purpose. At first I thought it was because I am not so elegant in my dress uniform as Thoros, but I wonder now if it was to quiet my tongue!'

'You think too much of yourself, brother.' Raldoron's irritation came to the surface and he ran a hand through the stubble of hair on his head. He found a wine jug and goblets that had not yet been

stowed for transit, and helped himself to a generous measure. ‘No one dares raise his voice in the Emperor’s presence.’

‘That is it, then?’ Amit demanded. ‘We go with the Angel back to our ships and then to the crusade at hand, as if it is of no matter?’ He snatched the jug from Raldoron and took some wine for himself. ‘And what will we say to our battle-brothers when we pass word of this to them? Magnus has looked upon books he should not have read, so now our Librarians must sacrifice themselves? I have two psykers in my company, legionaries I have fought alongside, who I trust! What becomes of them now?’

‘You exaggerate.’

‘Do I?’ Amit prodded him in the chest. ‘I have no doubt our lord will welcome his warriors into the fold anew, without their hoods or with them. But what of the others? Dorn, for example? Have the Imperial Fists ever failed to take a command to the bitter end of its definition?’ He shook his head, looking away. ‘Tell me you are not torn by this diktat, brother. Imagine if I came to you and forbade you your sword or bolter, then pressed you to battle nonetheless. What would you do?’

‘I’d fight with what was left to me. Tooth and nail, if need be.’ He put down his goblet. ‘This command is for the good of the Imperium. And your words verge on courting open censure!’

Amit eyed him, ignoring the warning. ‘Lexicanium, Codicier, Epistolary. Those are not just words, Raldoron, ranks and status-markers that can be discarded out of hand and make no difference.’ He pointed at him. ‘The titles you hold – First Captain, Chapter Master, the Blooded… Strip those away and you would still be unchanged. But without the power of the psykers among our weapons of war, the Legiones Astartes leave themselves open to attack. I cannot be the only one who sees this!’

‘The benefits are outweighed by the hazards of opening a mind to the power of the warp,’ Raldoron countered. ‘Such things can drive a man to madness…’ He trailed off, and unbidden, a painful memory pushed to the surface of his thoughts. Suddenly he was recalling Brother Alotros, lost on Melchior, his sense of self shattered. Alotros, and the handful of others who suffered the same fate. Had it been the dark shadow of the warp that had pulled them from their reason, or something deeper?

Amit did not notice his moment of reverie; behind him, the copper doors were swinging open once again. ‘I am not convinced. I struggle to understand why the Emperor has made so arbitrary a decision.’

‘My father has never once been capricious throughout the millennia of his existence.’ Sanguinius entered the chamber, delivering the words evenly and without reproach. Raldoron wondered if he had heard everything that had been said; and then realised that it did not matter. He was the primarch; *he would know*.

Amit bowed with Raldoron. ‘My lord, I chose my words poorly, that’s not what I meant–’

‘Yes it is,’ said the Angel. There was something darker about his manner, the First Captain noted. Sanguinius always had an air of the numinous, the distant, about him, but here and now he seemed almost distracted. ‘You said exactly what you meant.’

It was a rare moment to see the Flesh Tearer of the Fifth Company silenced like an initiate rebuked by his mentor, but no such admonishment came. Instead, the Angel looked back and forth between the two warriors and considered them.

‘Ral,’ he said to the First Captain. ‘Shall I tell you why I keep Captain Amit close at hand?’

‘I have wondered on occasion, master,’ ventured Raldoron.

‘You,’ Sanguinius told him, ‘you I keep near because you are close to the hearts of my sons as the

stone is to the sand. Berus is High Warden because he knows our lore and our Legion's soul as though it were a living being. Azkaellon leads my Sanguinary Host because he distrusts everything and suspects threat in all places. But Amit…' He paused. 'Captain Amit will always speak his mind, never hesitating, even if he knows full well it courts reprimand.'

'You may be assured of that until my dying day,' Amit noted.

The Angel nodded once. 'But never forget. The Emperor's word is law, and his will be done. The Decree of Nikaea is now Imperial commandment, and we will respect it as such. The Librarians will be re-integrated back into the tactical ranks. They are still legionaries. They will make me proud no matter what weapon they carry into battle.' He turned to look at Amit and fixed him with a steady, unwavering gaze. 'And as for whatever challenges fate puts to us after this day… The Blood Angels will deal with them as they come.'

Raldoron accepted this in silence. His doubts, however, did not lie quiet.

PART III

THE RED ANGEL

FIFTEEN

Temple of Bones
Ignition
An Act of Defiance

Tanus Kreed's path was tiled with the crowns of a hundred thousand skulls, each one smoothed and polished as if it were a careworn cobblestone on the street of a fringe world. His footfalls gave off a peculiar echo in the halls of the cathedral; the density of the walls gave the sound a brittle timbre.

The noise of the battle outside could barely reach them here. It was far away, a dull rumble like the breakers upon a distant shoreline. Bolt-fire crackling, screams and hell-shrieks resonating – it was a fitting ambience.

He ran the fingers of his gauntlet over the arches and pillars rising high over his head to support the conical roof. Bunches of long femurs surrounded by ribcages rose up in clusters to form the shape of the pillars, each secured in place by the tiny rods of phalanges from children's hands. Jaws and spines formed porticos, butterfly hips dressed the cloister walls, and the skulls went on forever. Sightless eye sockets glared out at the legionary from above and below, some lit from within by plasmatic torchlight.

The great bone temple was a magnificent creation, he reflected, a devotional work that dwarfed even the greatest monuments the Word Bearers had erected to the Emperor, when they had still called him master.

Kreed coloured at the thought of that. Lorgar and his sons had laboured so long in service to the Urizen's aloof and uncaring father, and for what? They had believed so strongly in his greatness, courted the truth of his divine nature in all their acts and wars during the Great Crusade. The XVII Legion had put whole worlds to the sword for daring to defy the Emperor, and more had been set to work to build works to glorify him.

Then the betrayal at Khur happened, and all eyes were finally opened. It began with the obliteration of Monarchia, that perfect tribute to the Emperor, and it ended with Monarchia, the wasteland where Lorgar was chastised for his blind love. His zealotry denied, spat upon. Tanus Kreed had been there. He had seen it happen.

In the aftermath, was it so surprising that the Bearers of the Word had realised that there was a greater truth to be borne? A Word not of a mortal pretending and denying his way to godhood, but of *real* gods, *real* powers with the touch of ruin and chaos at their fingertips?

'Acolyte?' Captain Harox was at his side, waiting. Kreed hadn't noticed that he had halted. He said nothing and resumed his pace, listening to the echo, feeling the build-up of silent energy in the dank air. This place, this Cathedral of the Mark, was the kind of monument they should have been creating all along. All it took was the greatest betrayal to make that clear.

The lofty, vaulted corridor widened, presently becoming a circular atrium, and two great curtains

made of tanned human skin parted to allow Kreed and Harox entry. One wall of the chamber was a circular mandala of thin limb-bones that mimicked the frame of a chapel's devotional window, and ruddy light leaked though it, staining the yellowed shades of the uneven walls. In the middle of the floor was the entrance to a shaft that ran the height of the tower, the edges of it spiked like a maw. Skeletal arms and hands formed a ring around the sheer edge, and an unsettling azure light emanated from deep below. There was a great blood fane down there, Kreed understood, a sacrificial altar like the ones on Kajor and a dozen other annexed worlds. So much pain and anguish had been poured into it that a hole had opened into the immaterium; the light was a trickle of the non-space of the warp, bleeding into this dimension, and it enticed him to come closer, to reach for it…

Kreed forced himself to look away. More tapestries of agony, flayed skins of different ethnicities sewn together to make artistic forms, hung from the walls. Thick hawsers that resembled tanned leather threaded with horsehair were strung here and there, rising up through the mouths of skulls to suspend a glittering, indistinct shape in the ruddy gloom overhead.

Kreed did not glance up, however. His attention could not be drawn away from the pair of creatures that stood in the middle of the atrium, posturing and spitting at one another like a pair of fighting animals.

It was a shock to see the winged, horned monster fully revealed in all its maleficent glory. What the Acolyte had only glimpsed a fraction of in its ghostly manifestation aboard the *Dark Page* was now here and real and immediate. Everything about it threatened to overwhelm him, from the brimstone stink of its body to the fuliginous aura that moved with its every step. The Bloodthirster saw Kreed and broke off, cocking its head to study him.

'The messenger,' sneered Ka'Bandha. 'I had thought you fled.'

'No,' he replied, turning away a moment to wipe an errant trickle of blood from his nostril. The same pain, the same pressure he had felt before, tightened around his thoughts. Kreed resisted, pushed through, refusing to buckle, even as he saw Harox at his side suffering the same and faring little better.

The other creature defied any description. Its soft, pink body resembled human flesh of flawless, silken perfection. Kreed imagined it as the expression of a naked nymph-like form pulled and twisted through a shroud of surreality until its handsome flawlessness had been corrupted by the bloom of new limbs, crustacean claws and a monstrous head that was more horned bovine than humanoid. The rapacious gaze it laid upon him made the warrior feel somehow soiled.

'See how it shows more bravery than you, scion of Khorne,' hissed the other daemon. 'It did not abandon the battle after striking only one blow.'

The bat-winged creature blurred and slapped the goat-face with the back of its clawed hand. 'Question my resolve again and I will send you back to Slaanesh speared by iron.' Ka'Bandha prodded its opposite in the chest, making it squeal in pleasure-pain. 'I'll hurt you so you won't enjoy it, Kyriss.'

The other creature picked itself up and gave a demure curtsey. 'Your promises excite me, Bloodthirster. I only wish we had time to explore them together.'

Ka'Bandha snorted in derision. 'Messenger. Have you come to watch the endgame? Above, the void-war is fought to a standstill, and down here the tide of battle turns in upon itself.'

'Sanguinius laughed at your offer of fellowship.' Kreed dared to say the words, regretting it instantly when Ka'Bandha advanced angrily toward him, seizing upon the implied insult. The Acolyte stood his ground. 'The Warmaster was right. The Angel is too pious, too enraptured by his father-god

to ever consider going against him. His loyalty runs deeper than you could ever reach.'

Kyriss gave an arch snort. 'Anyone can be turned, if one knows where to apply the correct pressure. Even a primarch.'

'*The Angel must fall and never rise*,' intoned Ka'Bandha, repeating the words that Horus had said. '*Without him, his sons will embrace the scarlet path*.' The daemon laughed, fangs clashing. 'I have set this in motion. Sanguinius has been struck from the battlefield, and his precious Legion are leaderless and enraged. They will soon give in to their baser instincts. The cry of blood for blood's sake screams in their ears.' The creature's jaws flexed in sympathetic hunger. 'Only I can understand the glorious release of bloodlust, and only Khorne can share that with them. I smell it on them, messenger. They are so *very* close.'

Kreed imagined that moment; the Blood Angels stripped of their sanctimonious, arrogant nobility, the armour of their hauteur dirtied by mindless, animal rage. A fitting degradation for the favoured of the Emperor, he thought.

'They will burn in the fires of their own fury,' growled Ka'Bandha, relishing the thought of it, 'and it is then that they will kneel, if only for the taste of more blood.'

'You make it sound so easy!' Kyriss snapped. 'But I should expect nothing less. Your intellect is as brutish as your tactics, Bloodthirster!' The gangly daemon stalked around the pit mouth on spindly, sculpted legs. 'It is I who have prepared the way for this, I who marshalled the whispers of the aether and the unlocking of the sorrows of Signus!' Kreed watched it flex its body in unnatural ways. 'This flesh I took as my vessel from the Davinite priest was remade just as I remade truth and terror and fear on these worlds.' Clawed hands clacked angrily together. 'While you sharpened your blades and looked for things to kill, it was the emissaries of Slaanesh that opened the way. Mine were the cults that arose here, not yours, warrior of Khorne! I planted the seeds for the witch-cabals on Ta-Loc, Kol and a dozen other outposts. I led their psykers to the slaughter. I answered the summons!' Kyriss stamped its taloned feet on the bones beneath them. 'Remember that!'

The creature turned on Kreed and pointed a long, thin finger at the Word Bearers. 'Ka'Bandha is not master of the Signus Cluster, ephemeral, no matter how loud he may beat his sword against his armour. And neither is your mortal Warmaster. *I am*.'

Kyriss's arms all rose, as if in supplication, towards the dull light entering the chamber from an orifice at the pinnacle of the conical roof. Kreed's eyes followed the gesture, compelled by the silent demands of the daemon's motion.

'In the name of the Book,' muttered Harox, 'what is that?'

Kreed looked up and he beheld the object that he had, until now, been unable to see. It had been cloaked from his vision, he realised, hidden behind some kind of glamour cast by the daemon Kyriss's presence.

There, suspended by four of the thick skin-and-hair hawsers through pulley-weight mechanisms made of hip-bones and cogs cut from spinal columns, a huge frame of burnished, dirty brass sheathed in misted crystal swayed gently to and fro. Lit by a malignant blaze within, a livid crimson mist alike to the one that had coated Ka'Bandha's battle-axe frothed within its confines, spilling out in coils of hissing, spitting noise. Now that he could see it, now that Kyriss had revealed it to him, the Word Bearer felt a wave of emotion fall from it, passing through his body like particles of radiation. The mix of potent feelings made him falter, robbing him of his balance for a moment before he could recover.

Kreed shook his head as the sensation passed. In a split-second he had felt a powerful melange of sensations, and the ghost of them echoed in his head like a haunting refrain from a half-heard melody. The timpani of deep, rolling agony; the carillon of heart-lost sorrow; the strident strings of despair; and louder than all, almost drowning them out, the heavy, thunderous brass of a pure and undiluted fury.

'Behold the *ragefire*,' spat Kyriss, leering at the sorcerous device. 'A magick of the senses, captured and corralled. *Weaponised*. Did you feel it, ephemeral? Even the sight of it amplifies the baser nature of those so exposed.' The daemon pointed at Ka'Bandha's huge axe. 'The blow struck against the Angel's warriors was so tainted by this power. The kill-force of their deaths was magnified a thousand-fold… enough to shock their primarch into a fathomless sleep, where he will remain until the Ruinous Powers no longer wish it.'

Ka'Bandha grimaced. 'Foul psi-magick. It sickens me that I must be in its aura…'

The fragments fell into place in Kreed's thoughts. 'Without their master, the Blood Angels will descend deeper into their own fury… And if Sanguinius rises once they have torn through all false veneer of their dignity–'

'It will break the little angel's spirit,' said Kyriss, grinning hatefully.

Meros looked, but he did not see.

It seemed to him that he was in what had once been a corridor aboard the *Red Tear*, a wide passage the width of a hive-city boulevard. A great swathe of the outer hull was gone, torn away by the battle-barge's headlong fall from orbit and catastrophic crash landing, and now the corridor had become a gallery open to the elements. Caustic sands and ash blown on Signus Prime's howling winds pooled in the lee of support stanchions. Fingers of light from the primary star and its companions threw a sombre cast over everything.

Meros was here and he was not here. He felt as if a part of him was still out on the battlefield, rooted in the mud and fire, as if some fragment of his spirit was lodged there while this flesh and bone vessel had been ripped away.

Each time he tried to think anew, tried to move forwards, the horror of what he had witnessed cycled back through his thoughts and tortured him as he relived it.

The thought was like a raw, unhealed wound. *The Angel fell*. He remembered the weight of his bolt pistol and his chainaxe. Heavy, but not restrictive, powerful and ready to kill. The snarl on his lips as he stormed forwards to be in the primarch's radiance as the battle was joined. Cassiel off in the distance, firing and culling the maddened hordes of turncoat Signusi. Captain Nakir, a call for war on his lips, heard over the bubbling growls of the devil-dogs and screeching cries of winged furies.

There, before him, Sanguinius and the Bloodthirster trading barbs and then titanic blows that cracked the earth. It would have been easy to become distracted, to behold that glorious duel to the exclusion of all else.

Meros remembered cleaving the skull of a bat-winged daemon, the ripe stink of the ichor that spattered from the killing wound. The fight taking him away to a place where only attacker and defender existed. When he looked up again, shaking tainted blood from the spinning teeth of the chainaxe, he saw the Angel strike a lethal blow upon the Bloodthirster–

The Angel fell.

Meros closed his eyes. He wanted to be wrong. He wanted to unsee what he had seen.

The whip of barbed brass, striking his liege lord in a moment of supreme betrayal. Sanguinius, his face contorted in pain, crashing to the ground. Meros remembered losing all sense of self-preservation, of doubt, simply breaking into a headlong charge to come to his master's aid.

But then the red fire, and the blinding sweep of the daemon-lord's axe. The cataclysm as it descended into the mass of hundreds of Blood Angels, all of them storming forwards with the same intent as Meros.

He had been looking at Brother Gravato when the monstrous battle-axe landed its blow. A bolus of incredible energy, liberated from nothingness, exploded across the ranks of the warriors.

The Angel fell, and my brothers perished.

An inferno of hate crashed in the wake of the blow and suddenly hundreds of legionaries were *gone*. Flesh and bone, adamantium and ceramite, obliterated by a power beyond reckoning. Bodies burned to cinders, armour crushed to blackened fragments, legionaries Meros had known well erased from the face of the galaxy in a single heartbeat.

And the greatest cruelty of it was the sharing of their deaths. Meros felt them all ending at once, felt it in his blood and his bones, a shock that shuddered through him and every other son of Sanguinius. If the Apothecary had believed in such a thing, he might have said that it burned a hole through his soul

He fell to his knees, struggled, stumbled back into a run. All he could see was the primarch, lying in a shallow crater. The Angel's wings were curled about him like a white shroud, his flesh deathly pale.

Meros's hearts seized in his chest. Sanguinius lived, but he was lost to them. The Apothecary reached out to touch his master's face and felt the flutter of warmth; in that moment the shard of fear that had pierced him – for it was that emotion and no other – became fire and fury. Deep in his psyche, Meros was aware of something breaking, a chain shattering, a barred door ripped from its hinges. The shock touched something primal and deadly in him, and he knew without question that every warrior who shared his bloodline was experiencing the same thing.

'Get back!' Strong arms shoved him away and he fell against the mud. The gold armour of the Sanguinary Guard surrounded him, gathering around their lord. Azkaellon looked stricken, his eyes wild. 'Protect the primarch!'

Meros remembered standing up, glimpsing Raldoron at the run, the First Captain's warplate smeared with polluted vitae. The pale cast of astonishment on his face. 'We must fall back to the flagship,' Raldoron shouted, 'Regroup!'

The Apothecary lurched back toward his fallen commander, forcing away all thought of what had happened, concentrating on the moment. 'I will aid him,' he began. It was his calling. It was what he was trained to do.

The Angel fell. And so did I.

The buzzing of a teleport beacon sounded close to his ears, but Meros paid no heed to it. He reached for the primarch once more as emerald lightning engulfed them.

And now he looked, and he saw.

In the infirmary, a dozen Apothecaries crowded around the comatose form of Sanguinius, trying every method to recall him to wakefulness and failing. He had watched for a time, his body still shaking from the rematerealisation trauma of the wide-sphere teleportation effect, repeating what he had seen to the stunned disbelief of the warriors who had stayed to defend the *Red Tear*.

In a way, all of them had known the moment it happened. Not just those on the battlefield, but here in the grounded flagship, and doubtless those up high in orbit, among the endless flashes of las-fire that marked the ongoing space engagement.

Meros leaned forward and held on to a broken guide rail for support, as if the deck beneath him were pitching like that of a galleon in a storm.

When the air deadened around him, he knew who had come.

'Did they kill him?' asked the woman, a sob caught in her throat.

He shook his head. 'You should not be here, Tillyan.'

'How could they kill him?' insisted Niobe, demanding an answer like a needy child.

'The Angel is *not dead*.' Meros ground out the words through gritted teeth. 'But he has… *fallen*. Into a deathless slumber. The shock…' He faltered, unable to frame his thoughts. 'I don't know how.'

But that was not entirely true. He *suspected*.

At first, when word had come to him of the suicides and mental breakdowns among the crew-serfs and remembrancer contingent in the fleet, Meros had considered the possibility of a disease vector as the root cause. A virus of the mind, something that left the genhanced untouched but infected the common human. Now he wondered if the cause was non-corporeal in nature. It was no secret that the energies of warp space could ruin a man exposed to them, just as the glare of a sun would burn out eyes or radiation contaminate unprotected flesh. The stench of the warp was on these monstrosities, these *daemons*. If they corrupted and tainted the matter of the world as Meros had seen them do, then it would be within their power to cast a malign influence over minds unready to resist them.

He remembered poor Halerdyce Gerwyn, terrified by the sight of the immaterium, afraid to sleep for fear of what he would see in his dreams, finally driven to seek suicide in his search for peace of mind. The action of Meros's catalepsean node implant had enabled him to go without stasis-sleep since before the flotilla had arrived in the Signus Cluster. *If I embraced sleep now,* he wondered, *what would I see?*

And a far greater question loomed larger. *What if the Legiones Astartes are* not *immune to such powers?*

'He's trapped,' Niobe was saying. 'And without Sanguinius, we will all die here.'

The woman's words lit a sudden, towering anger in Meros's chest, and he rounded on her with enough speed to make her cry out in fear. 'Be silent!' he roared, his choler turning to rage out of nothing. 'Get below and stay there! Now! *Now*!' In that moment, all he wanted to do was swat her aside, crush her fragile meat into pulp against the broken bulkheads.

Niobe fled, and Meros's surge of fury ebbed with her, dissipating as quickly as it had come.

He grimaced and took in a long breath, reaching deep inside to quieten himself.

He did not succeed.

The battle was spiralling toward madness.

Brother-Sergeant Cassiel dropped into cover behind a grounded speeder; the contra-gravity flyer had been swatted from the sky by a hybridised horror that merged the characteristics of a gigantic hornet and a battery of scimitars. The crew died in the impact, but Cassiel's squad had avenged their deaths with plasma fire and a cascade of frag grenades. For all the sheer, sickening presence of these so-called daemons, they could still die if you poured enough fire into them. This single grim fact was all the veteran had to hold on to. Everything else was crumbling around him, coming apart like wet

sand.

The din of blind guns and the crash of claws and blades came from all sides. Unit cohesion was gone. Communications from squad to squad were a mess of overlapping channels and broken protocols, and then only when the vox could actually be coaxed into working. In the past hour, Cassiel had received a dozen conflicting orders, some from the same voices only moments apart. His company commander, Captain Furio, had ordered an advance and then a retreat, on both occasions missing out vital code phrases to authenticate his directives. It was either a ruse or a failure of will. Either option was unthinkable.

Thick smoke that ran black and crimson engulfed the battle zone, cutting visibility down to almost nothing; and yet at odd moments the clouds would part as if they were part of a staged performance, if only to show the legionaries the towers of the great temple of bones looming large in the distance. The inertial mag-compass display in Cassiel's helmet was constantly shifting, making it hard to find a heading. In annoyance, he had torn it off and thrust it into the hands of Kaide, the Techmarine, demanding he repair it. Kaide insisted the helm was working perfectly.

Leyteo dared to peer over their cover and snipe off a trio of rounds at a black dog-beast that came toward them barking and snarling. It died in a mess of innards, and Cassiel swore that he could see a twinkling mist dissipate from its cooling corpse.

The sergeant rested against the speeder wreck, his heavy backpack pressed to the steaming metal. He checked his ammunition and scowled. It was enough for now, but he had no idea of how long it would be before resupply. Cassiel considered picking up a weapon dropped by one of the cannon-fodder zealots, but the gun was for human hands, and it would be a like a toy to a legionary; that, and the fact that the grip was coated in some kind of perfumed slime that seemed to exude from the weapon itself. He glanced around at the dozen or so other Blood Angels who held their places around the wreckage. All were sullen and withdrawn, offering nothing.

A cold, steady drumbeat of dread was working its way through Cassiel's thoughts, and he could not stem it. He had seen the great winged creature, the Bloodthirster, sweep across the face of the suns as it passed over them, diving back toward the bone cathedral. The shadow it cast was not just the absence of light, but an eclipse of sense and reason. In the moment he had fallen under its darkness, the veteran had never felt so alone, so isolated from his battle-brothers. For a legionary it was a little-death with a horror all of its own.

Under it all, the echo of *the shock* had not faded. Cassiel had not spoken of it to Kaide or Leyteo, at first because they were knee-deep in killers but later because he had no words to express it. The sergeant didn't need to ask if they had felt it too – one look into their eyes and he saw the mirror of his own hollow gaze. A great, baleful firestorm had burned briefly away in the heart of the fighting, and Cassiel had heard death-screams in the singing of the blood in his ears. He did not know what it meant.

Footsteps drew them all to their guns as a battered youth in scout armour staggered out of the smog and into the midst of the group. His gun was clogged with blood and viscera where it had been used like a club, and there were deep claw-cuts across his face and neck, wounds that did not seem to be clotting. The scout bore the sigil of the 72nd Company, barely visible through the impact dents on his chest plate.

'Ho, brother,' said Leyteo. 'Where is your squad?'

The scout ignored the question. 'He's dead,' said the youth. 'It killed him. I saw it.'

‘Who?’ Kaide asked, but Cassiel’s throat tightened. He instinctively knew what the youth meant.

‘No,’ snapped the sergeant. The shadow was falling over him again. ‘No! The Angel lives! He cannot be killed!’ Cassiel grabbed the scout by the gorget and pulled him off-balance. ‘You are mistaken!’ he bellowed. ‘Say it!’

‘No,’ came the reply. The scout offered no resistance, and that made Cassiel’s fury burn even hotter. In that moment he felt his control slip away and he readied his fist to strike the youth with a blow that would crush his skull. ‘No,’ he repeated.

‘Stay your hand!’ The command was a rough shout, and a figure in black came forward through the mist, brandishing the sparking rod of a crozius. Legionaries stood back as he approached, and Warden Annellus’s scowling helm surveyed them all with grim intent. Cassiel released his grip, but his fists went tight with unspent hatred.

‘Hold, brothers,’ Annellus insisted, casting around. ‘Our master lives. I know this for fact.’

‘How can you?’ demanded Kaide. ‘The vox is contaminated by enemy signals and subterfuge. There has been no word–’

‘I know *here*!’ The Warden slammed his fist against his chest. ‘You all felt the…’ He paused, struggling to find the word, ‘…the *darkness* pass, didn’t you? And even now, the echo of it claws in our minds.’

Cassiel nodded. He couldn’t deny it. There was a malaise out here, working on all of them. Silent and unseen, stoking their rage with every passing moment.

‘We have to get away from this place,’ muttered the scout.

‘No,’ said Annellus, removing his helmet so he could look them in the eyes. ‘There is nowhere we can go that this will not touch us. If we falter or lose focus, the enemy will use it against us.’ His eyes flashed. ‘So pity their mistake, my brothers. They took the worlds of weakened men by coward’s subterfuge. They fail to understand that now it is the IX Legion they face instead.’ The Warden raised the crozius. ‘They seek to enrage us? They have done so. But it will be these monsters that pay the price for daring to unchain our hate!’

A roar of approval erupted from Cassiel’s lips, and the echo of it came from all the legionaries about him.

It served to mask the doubts, for the moment, at least.

The wind moaned through the shattered armourglass of the command deck’s portals, carrying with it the skirl of gunfire and other, less identifiable sounds from the distant battle. Captain Raldoron held the wireless vox-augur to his ear, listening to the device as it scanned back and forth across the tactical communications channels, struggling to find something to lock on to. Every signal was the same – a wash of bubbling static that at first seemed random, but after a moment’s scrutiny became a pattern like mocking laughter or atonal hymns.

Raldoron’s patience snapped and he spun about, hurling the device across the bridge with such force that it exploded into fragments against the far bulkhead. The mute servitors working at makeshift repairs to the command consoles paid no heed to the captain’s moment of unexpected fury, but there was no mistaking the judgement in the eyes of Azkaellon, who had chosen that moment to enter the chamber.

The First Captain glared at the Guard Commander, daring him to make comment, but Azkaellon seemed only weary. The expression seemed out of place on the warrior’s hawkish face, and it told

Raldoron all he needed to know about the primarch's current state.

'The Legion is in disarray,' he said, after a moment. 'The battle in orbit fares little better than the melee on the wastes. Signals are erratic and garbled. Entire companies are out of contact or else ignoring direct orders to disengage and fall back.'

'I cannot blame them,' Azkaellon said quietly.

Raldoron's eyes narrowed. 'This is not who we are. There are reports of legionaries killing everything in their path, fighting without heed or direction. It is wrong! The Blood Angels are not Russ's dogs or Angron's feral savages!'

'No,' said the Sanguinary Guard, his hard tone returning. 'We are worse than them, for we hide it beneath our noble guise. We keep our fury chained. Small wonder then, that it burns brighter when finally given release.'

The captain strode angrily across the command deck, shaking his head. 'You excuse this?' He jabbed his finger toward the broken windows and the wasteland beyond. 'The enemy wounds us and so we lose control in a heartbeat? I say no!' He drew close to Azkaellon, his words rising into a shout, his fists clenching. 'Is that the Angel's way, brother? Is that what he would want from his sons?'

'Look to yourself,' he shot back. 'We all feel the wrath, every son without question.'

Raldoron's rising anger robbed him of words and he turned away with a hissing snarl. The captain smacked his armoured fist into his palm, grinding ceramite against ceramite.

Azkaellon fixed him with his cold, steely gaze. 'We must decide now how we shall proceed, you and I. With Lord Sanguinius laid low and the Council of Angels scattered, it falls to us to take joint command of the Legion.'

The First Captain was stopped dead by the Guard Commander's statement. He was right, of course. But still it felt like disloyalty to say it aloud. 'Very well,' he said, biting out the reply.

'The primarch is the Legion is the primarch,' said Azkaellon, repeating the words that were laser-etched in High Gothic about the neck-ring of his golden armour. 'His life must be preserved over all else. We must remove him from the malign influence of this foul place, fight our way free of the Signus Cluster.'

'You want to *run*?' Raldoron could not keep a sneer from his words. 'This ship cannot lift. The Techmarines in the engine halls have only just managed to place the reactor core in quietus. You would have us leave the flagship behind for the enemy to pick clean?'

'Evacuate the primarch to another vessel,' Azkaellon went on. 'Unshackle the core. The *Red Tear*'s death was not prevented, only postponed.'

'And what of the legionaries left behind?' snarled Raldoron. 'There are not enough auxiliary craft to take them all, even if we could pull them back here!' He prodded the Guard Commander in the chest. 'You callous bastard! You would sacrifice our own?'

Azkaellon met his anger with cold defiance. 'There is much I would do for the life of Sanguinius. I deem you or I, or any brother who wears the crimson, expendable, if it means the Angel lives on! And I defy you to find me one warrior among the Legion who would not willingly cut their own throat to save him!'

'I won't allow it!' Without conscious thought, the First Captain's hand fell to the brass hilt of the power sword at his hip.

'That choice has never belonged to any of us.'

Raldoron shook his head, anger building anew. 'The Angel gave his orders. It is our duty to fulfil them or to die in the attempt. Signus must be purged! His will be done!' The sword sang as a measure of its length emerged from its sheath, and by reflex Azkaellon reached up to draw the glaive encarmine from his back-scabbard.

The two warriors froze, their raw fury straining for liberation, blades singing as they drifted toward deadly release.

Raldoron experienced a flash of black, abyssal dread – and he unclenched his hand, letting the sword drop back into place. Azkaellon warily did the same, and they stood glaring at one another, slowly reeling in their ire.

At length, the Guard Commander spoke. 'Whatever sorcery happened out there, whatever arcane power has been employed, it has touched us all, those proximate and those not. A fire has been kindled, Raldoron. It may consume us.'

'How?' He asked. 'How could they know?'

Neither of them needed to speak of *the flaw*; both had been there on the day long ago that Sanguinius had brought them to secret counsel, where he had revealed the sorrow that haunted him. The dark potentiality of a red thirst buried in each and every one of them, now dragged to the surface by… what? *Magick and witchcraft?*

'If we cannot escape this place, we will succumb.' Azkaellon frowned. 'Look at us, brother. Fury is eating at us from within. It is only a matter of time before we become no better than the berserkers we dispatched in battle. We will fall into the company of death.'

Raldoron closed his eyes, and saw armour painted over with ink-black.

When he opened them again, a third figure was standing at the broken hatchway, clad in heavy robes.

Before either of them could speak, he reached up and pulled back the hood over his head. 'First Captain. Guard Commander. I would speak.'

'You are Kano. The once-psyker.' Azkaellon gave him a grave look. 'How long have you been listening to our words?'

'Long enough.'

'What do you want?' snapped Raldoron, distrust evident in his eyes. 'This is no time for distractions.'

'A number of my brothers have gathered,' said Kano. He saw the two warriors share a look, both of them immediately understanding that he meant more by that word than just his fellow Blood Angels. 'Some from the battle, some down from orbit.'

Azkaellon eyed him. 'You summoned them?'

Kano shook his head. 'We came because we knew we were needed.'

'Too late,' Raldoron said bitterly.

'No,' said Kano. 'Not yet.' He looked from one warrior to the other. 'Azkaellon speaks the truth. A shadow falls across every legionary whose heart is Blood Angel, and that darkness has a source. I have seen it.'

'By witch-sight?' The captain challenged him to answer.

'Does it matter, lord?' Before Raldoron could reply, he pushed on. Kano put aside all doubts in his mind, concentrating on what he knew to be true, what he believed was right. Nothing else mattered now. Kano knew that with cold clarity. If there was such a thing as fate, then his would turn on the

next words he spoke. ‘The temple of bones holds the heart of the daemon’s power in this world. If it can be found, it can be destroyed. The Legion will be freed from its own fury.’

The First Captain glanced towards the ruined oval portal. ‘A battleground of madness lies between us and that objective. An army of monsters from the soul of all nightmares and our brothers caught upon it.’

‘It would be a crossing through hell, aye,’ said Kano.

Azkaellon studied him coldly. ‘And what of the Angel? What have you *seen* for him?’

‘I can revive him.’ Kano said the words aloud for the first time, and he knew in his hearts that is was no vain hope, no idle boast. ‘*We* can revive him.’

‘The psykers…’ Raldoron was grim-faced. ‘If Sanguinius was felled by the power of the warp, then by the same he could awaken.’

Kano nodded, fully aware of the door he was about to open – not just for himself, but his entire Legion. ‘These daemons are the spawn of the immaterium, and only by like powers can their influence be broken.’

‘That’s not all that will be broken,’ grated Azkaellon. ‘What of the Nikaea Edict? The command of the Emperor of Mankind? Are we to go against him, and the rule of Terra? It will make us traitors!’

Raldoron turned a solemn gaze upon his comrade. ‘Then so be it.’

SIXTEEN

Witch-minds
Red Ghosts
Threads

‘This will be dangerous,’ said Ecanus. ‘Some of us will die.’ He ran a hand over his bare scalp. His skin looked pallid in the sombre light of the medicae chamber.

‘And yet still we came.’ Brother Deon stood behind him, keeping to the shadows. Deon’s face was always hidden in the gloom of his hood, only one small sliver of his ruddy complexion visible to the rest of them.

Kano found himself nodding. ‘None of us are ignorant of the price this will exact.’ He looked around the room at the seven other warriors who stood in a loose group, some in their battle armour, others in duty robes. They all shared a single trait: a look in their eyes that belied a deeper truth.

We all saw the red angel, the angel of pain, Kano thought. *And we all fear what it means.*

There was only one face missing, and the absence nagged at him. The Rune Priest Stiel was nowhere to be found. Kano was aware that Captain Redknife and his Space Wolves had gone out to join the advance on the Cathedral of the Mark, but that had been before the shock of the primarch’s fall. He had hoped his cousin from the VI Legion might stand with them in this act, but Kano had no idea if the dour Fenrisian was still alive.

‘We’re wasting time,’ said a rough, urgent voice. Novenus, the eldest of them, stood with his head bowed and his long, steel-coloured hair in an unkempt mess about his armoured shoulders. The old warrior’s armour was dusty and spattered with bloodstains that had yet to dry. He had walked in from the wastes with an empty bolter in his hand, leaving behind his brothers of the 57th Company to heed the unspoken call.

Before him was Sanguinius.

The primarch’s mighty frame, still armour-clad, lay across a cruciform operating stage under a battery of auspex arrays and illuminators. His wings, spread out beneath him, gave the impression of a great drift of snow holding him up, but the flawless white was marked with black scars of fire damage and the stark ruby of spilled blood.

His repose was not the tranquil solemnity of the dead, but a darker sleep tormented by agonies that only the Angel could know. Sanguinius’s gallant aspect was acted upon by subtle tells of deep pain. His face was that of a dreamer snared by nightmares.

Brother Salvator, a rail-thin and vigilant legionary from the 269th Company, stared at his master. The three long scars that went from his jawbone to his temple were livid. ‘I see this with my own eyes and I still cannot believe it.’ A few of the other warriors nodded in agreement. ‘How was this done, Kano? The Angel cannot fall! He is a titan, with strength to shrug off the blows of any foe!’

It was Ecanus who answered. ‘This day Sanguinius does not suffer a wound to his flesh. He suffers

the wounds to *ours*.' He turned to Salvator. 'Brother, our primarch is the soul of the Blood Angels. It has always been thus. We ride in the wake of his glory. But that path goes both ways. He feels our pain, as only a father could.' He looked away. 'And this is the result.'

'The creature, Ka'Bandha…' began Kano. 'The blow it struck was nothing of this world. There was a power to it, a warp-taint.'

Novenus nodded. 'Aye, I saw the uncolour of that baleful fire in the sky.'

'Five hundred battle-brothers dead, in the time it took to swing an axe blade.' Kano let that sink in. 'Captain Nakir and the sum of the bold 24th, all dead, and more with them. Sons from a dozen other companies. All murdered because they dared to come to their master's aid.'

'A whole company, gone. It was no happenstance,' Ecanus added. He nodded toward the Angel. 'This was a calculated act, to take him from the field and throw us into disarray.' He shook his head. 'The storm of anger that rages out there would not have gained such power so swiftly if Sanguinius stood with us.'

'Then we must wake him,' said Deon. 'Bring him back to us.'

Kano nodded and beckoned his brothers forward. One by one, they took up places in a ring around the primarch, each legionary taking a moment to prepare himself. It would be difficult at first; without their psychic hoods to regulate and channel their preternatural abilities, the gathering of former Librarians would need to call on the fullness of their strength of will to work together in meta-concert.

'We open the path together, but only one can take this journey,' said Novenus.

'I will go,' Kano told them. Carefully, he reached out and placed his hand upon the chest plate of the Angel's armour. 'I will bring him back.'

'And so we do this?' Salvator demanded, eyes widening. 'We break oath and no brother here questions it?'

Kano shot him a look. 'What could be said, brother? Each of us knows full well the import of what we are about to do. There is no room for doubt.' He paused. '*Fraternitas*. *Legio*. *Pater*. *Imperator*. That is the order of our loyalty, and it will always be so. If I live beyond this day, I will gladly face the Emperor's judgment on what I do now.'

A ninth figure entered the chamber, standing across the threshold to block any attempt to leave. 'We will all face it.' Azkaellon's golden armour glittered like the blade of the bared glaive encarmine in his mailed fist. The point of the sword clanged against the deck. 'You will do this,' said the Guard Commander, 'and I will watch you. Know that any sign of actions untoward… of *witchery*… will see your head taken from your neck.'

Kano closed his eyes. 'We begin,' he said.

Meros glanced over his shoulder at Captain Raldoron as they picked their way along the twisted corridor. 'She will not agree,' he told him. 'She is not a soldier. She cultivates plants.'

'We are all at war now,' came the reply. 'You saved her life on the agri-world. She trusts you. Convince her.'

'I fear that coin has been spent,' he admitted. 'When last we spoke, I terrified her.'

The heavy footfalls of their power armour echoed off the *Red Tear*'s damaged walls, and the broken deck plates shifted alarmingly. The lower tiers of the massive battle-barge were a warren of compacted wreckage and debris. Precious few compartments were still whole and with power.

‘Then terrify her into compliance,’ Raldoron replied. ‘Believe me, if I could drug this civilian into docility and carry her in a gun-case, I would.’

‘It doesn’t work that way,’ Meros said, almost to himself. They had arrived at the sanctuary, and both of the Blood Angels bowed low to step in under the slumped archway of the cargo hatch. The single battle-brother standing sentinel threw them a nod, but said nothing.

The space beyond had been a long, wide tankage for water when the *Red Tear* was operational, but now it was an atrium of curved walls and suspended baffle plates, the only indicators to its former contents the patches of rust on the walls.

Humans filled the compartment. Many of them were injured; almost all of them were crew-serfs or indentured servants in drab ship-suits and the crimson-flashed uniforms of the Legion auxiliary. A handful, who stood out like withered tropical flowers amid parched grasses, were what was left of the fleet’s remembrancer contingent. Meros glanced at them; in the turmoil he had forgotten about the artists and the scribes, and he felt a pang of sympathy as their petrified faces turned toward him. He pitied them. They had no comprehension of the world they had been thrown into.

The remembrancers shied away when he came close. Meros’s gaze raked over the men and women lying under rough blankets or huddling together for safety. And there he found Halerdyce Gerwyn, his face pale and his breathing thready, staring up at the bulkhead above. Meros moved to speak to him, then thought better of it. There was little he could do for the sequentialist.

‘What is that?’ He turned to see Raldoron addressing a group of people who sat in a circle around a heating pod. One of them – the man Dortmund – had a small book in his hand, a crudely-printed thing of red ink on translucent paper.

Dortmund had been reading aloud when they entered, and now he held the tome to his chest as if it would protect him. ‘It is a collection of stories,’ piped the youth. ‘Words of courage and faith. Meant to inspire in times of hardship.’

Raldoron’s lips thinned. ‘That won’t be enough,’ he said, and they moved on.

The humans could not hide their fear, as much as some of them tried. Meros could literally smell it on them, his enhanced senses picking out the chemical scent-triggers in their bodily odours. He tried to imagine this moment from their viewpoint, but it was hard to frame his thoughts in so limited a fashion. Meros had the benefit of being set to his task of battle, without pause to ruminate on what greater meaning events might have. On a deeper level, he was aware that the circumstances of the Signus Cluster mission would have far-reaching consequences not just for the fleet, or his Legion, but for the Imperium in totality. If he halted, allowed these questions to rise to the fore, then perhaps he too would know something of the dread these people were experiencing.

But he could not dwell on thoughts of sedition, of brothers turning against brothers. He had to fight the battle in front of him. And then the next. *And the next*.

They found the Niobe woman with a few of the other survivors from the *Stark Dagger*. She flinched when she saw the Blood Angels and shrank back.

Meros raised his hand. ‘Tillyan. I am sorry. Before, in the corridor… I forgot myself.’

She nodded warily. ‘It’s all right. I understand.’ That seemed like a truth. ‘You could not know. This was all new to you.’

‘You didn’t see what happened when the daemons came,’ offered Zhomas bleakly. ‘We too thought we could fight. At first.’

Meros saw the perpetual sneer of the one called Hengist as he approached them warily. ‘No

surprise,' spat the criminal. 'Even the great Legiones Astartes can't beat these hellspawn!'

'That remains to be seen,' said Raldoron, silencing him.

Meros's brow creased. He wasn't used to dealing with civilians, with the ordinary ranks of humanity. They had social codes and ways of conduct that he did not understand – and this was a moment of import. He sighed. 'Niobe, your gift…'

Her expression altered in an instant, becoming guarded. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'You do,' he corrected. 'It doesn't matter how you were able to conceal yourself from the black ship tithe for so long, that is not important.'

Zhomas caught the words *black ship* and physically recoiled from Niobe's side. 'You… You're a psyker?'

'I knew it!' Hengist released a shout. 'I knew there was something wrong about her. Didn't I say? *Didn't I*?'

Raldoron aimed a finger at the man, and after that no one else dared to offer an opinion.

'I'm not a witch-mind,' Niobe said, in a small voice. 'I don't know what this *pariah* word means.'

'It means we need you,' Meros told her. 'You have a rare ability. It's how you survived, how you managed to escape. How it was the succubae did not see us.'

'No.' She was shaking her head.

'We are going to lose this war.' Meros said it aloud and heard a ripple of panic spread across the chamber. The blunt truth felt oddly liberating. 'Unless we can kill the thing that started it. You will help us do that.' He hesitated. 'I'm not offering you a choice, Tillyan. None of us have a choice.'

It seemed like an age had passed before she gave a shuddering nod. 'I'll come, if you keep me safe.'

'I will try.' He offered her his hand, and she reached for it. Her slender fingers were barely long enough to wrap around his palm.

Meros shared a glance with Raldoron as they moved back across the silent chamber with the woman at their side. The other survivors stared at Niobe with expressions of shock, fear and disgust; he wondered if they understood that by taking her, he had removed the only thing protecting them from the predations of the daemons. Every mortal in the sanctuary would be prey to the madness now.

'This way,' he said, leading Niobe away. Raldoron remained a moment, speaking quietly to the legionary on guard.

Helik Redknife was not a stranger to the feral beast that lurked in men's souls. He had seen it in himself too often, knowing that such a thing was real and had great power. Many believed that the Wolves of Russ were nothing *but* that force, wild and undisciplined, but those who thought so did not know the sons of Fenris. To recognise that bestial self and fight war with it, to shackle it to the needs of the great murder-make, required a degree of control no mere barbarian could ever manage.

Until this day he had not witnessed the sight of that feral power let slip in any other Legion but his own, but it was here, all around him, in the eyes of every Blood Angel he came across.

At his side, Brother Valdin held his bolter close, absently fingering the charms dangling from its fore-grip. 'Still nothing over the vox,' he reported.

Redknife nodded, glancing at the Rune Priest walking ahead of them. Stiel was bent low, tracing his fingers through the dry dirt at his feet. The war-fog around the Space Wolves had a peculiar stink to it that clogged the nostrils of the legionaries and the mist seemed to deaden the air as well, making

sounds waver. It was becoming increasingly difficult to make sense of what was going on in this hellish landscape.

The noise of war was all around them, the crashing of guns and the bloody ruin-sound of bodies opening to the sky; but the captain could not tell if he heard the defeat or the victory of the Blood Angels. Those sons of the Angel they had encountered since the disorder began paid them no heed. To a man, the warriors of the IX Legion seemed interested only in bloodletting and violence.

Stiel had put words to it. 'The fall of their primarch has released a red ghost upon them. I taste nothing but rage in the air.'

Redknife gave a solemn nod. He could understand. *If Russ were laid low by the blade of an enemy, would the Space Wolves react any differently?* But it sat wrongly with him. All Helik knew of the Blood Angels was of a Legion that bore little resemblance to this. They fought now with a ferocity that would give even a Blood Claw pause.

'Over there.' Valdin pointed, and Redknife saw a large group of figures in crimson armour gathered in a wide defile. He moved toward the formation, even as the Rune Priest broke into a sprint.

'No,' Stiel called out a warning. 'Keep back. They are not–'

His words came too late. Some of the Blood Angels had seen them, and they were turning, gathering to face the Space Wolves. Redknife counted at least three times the number of his squad, and he felt the weight of threat hanging in the air.

Wet blades glistened in the hands of the other legionaries. These were no common combat knifes, but custom weapons crested with barbs, more akin to the flaying blades of a butcher. The Wolf Captain halted, his hand on his sword, waiting. He did not need to look towards his skald to know what would come next.

Some of the Blood Angels were crouched, and as they came to their feet, Redknife saw they had been bent over the bodies of the dead; the last of the insane zealots sent by the beast-creatures to bog down the assault force.

The warriors had removed their helmets, and their faces were smeared with crimson, great tides of it that had cascaded down their chins and across their armour. The Space Wolf's teeth bared in shock and the Blood Angels did the same, fangs wet with glistening red.

The odour of torn flesh came across them and Redknife found his voice. 'What is this?' he demanded.

A legionary in war-damaged armour, a malevolent cast to his bearded, scarred face, came forward. He carried a flaying knife in his hand, and a trickle of blood from its tip painted a line across the dust behind him.

Amit. The Wolf Captain knew the warrior's name. He searched the Blood Angel's eyes for any kind of recognition and did not find it.

'You take the blood of the enemy?' said Redknife. 'That's not your way.'

'You don't know us.' Amit's reply was a low, feral growl. 'What are you?'

'We are kinsmen…' Valdin offered, stiffening.

Amit glowered at them, panting like an animal. 'Lies.' A shadow fell over his gaze. 'We are betrayed. You have always been against us. You all betrayed us!'

'No.' Redknife raised his hand, sensing the moment slipping away from him. 'Listen to me, cousin. Look past your fury.' But even as the words left his lips, he knew it was too late. In Amit's gaze, Redknife saw a bleak, furious cast that he had known only once before – when he had the ill-fate to

cross paths with the warriors of the Wulfen. There was nothing he could reach for – no reason, no sanity, only pure inchoate *rage*.

'Death to traitors!' bellowed Amit, exploding forwards with his blade singing through the air.

Redknife felt a wash of hot crimson spatter across his face as the Blood Angels captain cut Valdin's throat with his first blow, his warriors boiling over the broken landscape in a murderous frenzy.

The Space Wolf drew his sword and cursed the fate that had brought him to this moment, cursed the creatures that had set this madness in motion, cursed Warmaster Horus for daring to pit brother against brother. But more than that, he cursed the fact that it had been *right* to send him here.

He lost sight of Stiel in the thrashing clash of blades and gunfire, as the Blood Angels of Amit's company fell upon the Space Wolves with a wrath that was as fathomless as it was unstoppable.

And so we die here, he thought bitterly, as legionaries he would call kin overwhelmed him with ferocity borne of madness, a*nd the Allfather's great dream dies with us.*

The Stormbird flashed over the battlefield, fast and high, describing a ballistic arc toward the enemy stronghold.

At the aft drop-ramp, Raldoron stood grasping a stanchion, his other hand pressed to the armourglass of a square window in the hatch. Grimly, he watched the abnormal clouds over the war zone swirl and drift against each other, parting now and then to reveal glimpses of the cratered, blood-smeared earth below.

Sparks of light that could only be muzzle flashes underlit the haze in strobes of white, but there was no coherence to them. The First Captain's tactical skills enabled him to read any conflict like a map, swiftly picking out lines of attacker and defender, patterns of force and counter-force. He did not see that here, however.

There was only a wavering procession of red, broken in places, thickening into a mass in others. The army of the IX Legion, moving inexorably across the Plains of the Damned, drawn closer by the passing of the hours to the foot of the great affront that was the bone temple.

This was what they had been reduced to, then. The Blood Angels, once proud and vigilant, now remade, as undisciplined as wildfire. The best and the brightest of the Legiones Astartes had become less an army, more a mob baying for the blood of those who had wounded their father.

And the worst of it was, Raldoron *empathised*. Some fraction of him wanted to be down there with them, to lose himself in the scarlet hell of frenzy. There was a purity in it, he reflected, a kind of clear truth to the want for battle, battle and nothing more.

This has always been part of us, he thought. *The Angel knew it. Now it is unmasked and threatens to engulf every one of his sons.*

He looked away, his gaze finding the woman Niobe. She sat in an acceleration couch, bundled with straps into a seat built for a Space Marine, too big for a human of her slight frame. She was lost inside a vest of Imperial Army flak armour, far too large for her. Someone had given her a laspistol and she held the holstered gun, belt, strap and all, in her lap as though she did not know what to do with it.

Raldoron's lips thinned. He had already decided it was best not to think of her as a living being at all, but as a piece of hardware. A fragile device to be protected. A tool. The captain did not expect her to survive once they made touchdown. He only hoped it would be long enough to gain them entry into the Cathedral of the Mark. After that, he considered that the lives of every member of his strike

team would be measured in minutes, at best.

Raldoron wondered at the immeasurable talent Niobe possessed. It could not be seen, or heard or touched, but he couldn't deny that he *felt* it. Just being in close proximity to the woman, he sensed the strange dead-air texture that Meros had spoken of. But most noticeable was the way she calmed him, calmed *all* of them. He glanced over at the Apothecary, saw Meros with Sergeant Orexis, Cador, Racine and the others. All of them, they were set to their tasks, preparing for the fight ahead.

They were not distracted, not chafing at every tiny little annoyance. They did not think a slight hid in every word or deed. He and his legionaries did not knead the grips of their weapons and look upon the war below as if they were hungry for it. Raldoron frowned. It shamed him to admit that he too had been touched by the shock that had laid down the Angel. If they could not find the heart of this assault upon their will, as Kano had predicted, he dreaded to think where the path to fury might take them.

A black shape blurred past the window, to the aft of the Stormbird, and Raldoron's head snapped up, his musings immediately forgotten.

Out there a flock of furies – winged patchwork things, humanoids of livid-red flesh with clawed hands and barbed black wings – wheeled and turned in the wake of the aircraft. The creatures acted strangely, for long moments howling and clawing at one another as if they were in distress, annoyed beyond measure at the mere presence of the Blood Angels aircraft.

Then they attacked.

Their hideous gargoyle faces crowded the window as dozens of them swarmed over the fast-moving Stormbird, talons biting into the fuselage as they clawed at the hull and pulled at the stabiliser flaps. The aircraft bucked and dropped sharply. Raldoron saw a cluster of the beasts ground into bloody gobbets as they forced themselves into the intakes of the drop-ship's engines, clogging the turbines within.

He snatched up his bolter and kicked at the hatch release switch, swinging the drop-ramp open even though they were thousands of metres above the ground. Tainted air screamed into the troop bay and Raldoron opened fire, picking off the creatures that flitted through his narrow field of vision across the Stormbird's tail. A group of furies tried to gain entry through the yawning hatch, but the First Captain cut them down with a concentrated burst of bolt rounds, blowing them into the blood-misted slipstream.

The hull vibrated and the cloudy horizon banked sharply as grey smoke and engine components burst into the air. Raldoron swore a curse as the Stormbird's wings dipped and it began to spiral toward the ground.

They fell short of the projected landing point by a good measure, and the Stormbird collapsed as it hit the thick mud, wings cracking with the finality of the impact. Small fires began inside the troop bay, filling it with black smoke. Meros disengaged from his restraints and vaulted across the compartment to where Tillyan Niobe was curled in a foetal ball, and he ripped away the tether web holding her in place.

'Are you hurt?' She managed a weak shake of her head. 'Then move.' He placed his hand on the flat of her back, and propelled the woman towards the yawning hatchway.

Outside, the noise and the stench of the battleground assailed them. Niobe coloured at the sensations, picking her way across the shallow, blackened crater formed by the Stormbird's landing.

Meros looked up as Raldoron vaulted on to the top of the downed aircraft's hull. The First Captain

cast around, his bolt pistol and power sword in his hands, attempting to get his bearings. A moment ago, their path towards the enemy stronghold had seemed clear, but the fog of war was mercurial and ever-changing. To the Apothecary, it seemed as if they had flown for hours and still come no closer to the Cathedral of the Mark.

He followed Raldoron's gaze. To the edges of Meros's sight, there was only war, the unfolding combat between the strange forces of the enemy and the furious ranks of the IX Legion. He tasted a mist of vaporised blood at the back of his throat.

A shape flashed over his head, and Meros spun about, pulling up his gun. A gangly creature, taller than a legionary, landed atop the Stormbird and collided with Raldoron, the two of them tumbling into a roll as it knocked the captain onto the slope of a fallen wing. Cloven hooves clattered against the plasteel hull and claws raked at the First Captain's armour.

Raldoron slashed blindly with his sword and the blade flashed, a lucky cut beheading the beast in a fountain of blue liquid. Niobe baulked as the beast's head spun into the mud before her.

Meros grimaced. It was somehow still alive. A slavering, wide-jawed mouth in a skeletal face, an elongated skull rising high into a bony cone and great antler-like horns of dirty ivory. The face opened its maw and a long, purple tongue uncoiled, probing toward them. The Apothecary fired a bolt round into the middle of the forehead, blasting it apart in a welter of bone and gooey matter.

'A bloodletter,' said the woman, turning pale and gulping in air. 'That's what they call them.'

'More!' shouted Orexis from close by, as Raldoron scrambled back over the wreck to join them.

Packs of the lesser daemons crowded in around the crashed aircraft, and these ones carried glowing hell-blades that sizzled cherry-red with heat, like pokers drawn from a fire; yet they did not attack immediately. Instead, the bloodletters prowled around an invisible perimeter, snapping and hissing, occasionally daring to venture close before releasing atonal yowls of distress. The creatures swiftly focused their attention toward the woman, pinpointing her as the source of their anguish.

'They know it's her,' Meros muttered. The ethereal null aura centred on Niobe was anathema to these warp spawn. 'She pains them by fact of her presence.'

'Not for long,' said Raldoron. Even as he spoke, the creatures were closing the circle, steeling themselves to resist. As one, they broke into a charge and fell upon the squad.

Brother Cador died beneath three hellblades, each monstrous sword piercing his torso from a different angle. Meros glimpsed his body burst into flames and burn inside his armour. The Apothecary shoved the woman back against the wreck and fell into a fight with two more, gunning them down, using the chainaxe to finish the job.

But for each one cut or shot there was another beast rising to take its place. Meros counted his rounds, fearing they would be overwhelmed and die beyond the sight of their target.

A new roar – mechanical, heavy and dangerous – drowned out his doubts. Over the lip of the crater came a smoking, war-scarred vehicle on four grinding caterpillar tracks; the Mastodon was designed for deployment of full squads into the middle of combat zones, but this one had seen better days. Much of the armour plating had been melted away by baleful fires and many of the sponson guns were hanging broken and useless.

Legionaries rode atop the vehicle as it drove over the packs of the bloodletters, scattering them so the Blood Angels could pick them off. Those too slow to run became twisted flesh, foul bodies bursting under the spinning treads.

Meros saw a figure in black armour emerge from the vehicle: Annellus. The Apothecary's spirit

leapt to see his trusted brother Cassiel at the Warden's side, but the emotion faded when he saw the veteran's bleak, hollow-eyed gaze.

'Warden!' shouted Raldoron. 'Our thanks. Your aid was–'

'We're not here to aid you!' spat Annellus, growling out every word. 'We are here to kill!' His declaration brought a yell of agreement from Cassiel and the ragged group of legionaries aboard the transport. 'Either join us or get out of our way!'

Raldoron gave Meros a glance, then beckoned the woman Niobe to him. 'Annellus,' he replied. 'I'll forgive your lack of respect this once, but never again.' He strode to the Mastodon and mounted the vehicle in one swift leap. 'This machine, your legionaries, you are under my command now, understand?'

The Warden came at the captain, threatening him with his sparking crozius. 'You flee the field and then return to give *me* orders?' He waved the rod angrily in Raldoron's face. 'I kept these battle-brothers alive while all around us turned renegade and gave themselves to fury! I resisted–'

Raldoron backhanded Annellus across the face and put him down on the hull of the transport. It was not an act of anger, but of control. 'You resisted,' the captain agreed, 'but not well enough.' He offered the Warden a hand, and gingerly Annellus took it. 'But now we have an opportunity. A real chance to strike back; instead of letting this madness eat away at our control like a cancer.'

Meros helped Niobe climb into the transport. 'She can keep us safe.'

Annellus's face showed first annoyance, then confusion, and finally a reluctant acceptance. 'Forgive me, First Captain,' he replied. 'My temper was beyond me… I meant no disrespect.' His gaze bored into the woman. 'This one. She is a witch, then?'

'A pariah,' corrected Raldoron. 'And the key to our attack.'

Cassiel met Meros's gaze and gave a shallow nod. 'Brother,' he said. 'We feared you had been killed when…' He trailed off, the silent fear in his heart left unspoken.

'Sanguinius is not dead,' Meros told him.

'We saw him fall,' said Kaide, grim-faced, not daring to believe.

'The primarch lives, although his wounds are great.' Raldoron spoke loud enough for all to hear. He pointed toward the towers of agony visible in the distance. 'But if we do not destroy that edifice, then all lives – the Angel's and ours – will be forfeit.'

Kano screamed, giving voice to a pain that went beyond the physical, beyond the corporeal. His body was gone, forgotten to him. It was only his psyche that contained him, and the essence of Mkani Kano was in agony.

He was a fragment of glass propelled on a wave front, brittle and easily destroyed. He was ash in a storm, disintegrating. He was paper, touched by an inferno. The ex-Librarian reached deep within himself and opened the gates to the power he had kept silent since the day of the edict. Whispers of that force had escaped, now and again, but Kano had never let them go too far, even if there was a part of him that had wanted that release.

Not so now. He drew the full psychic force within him and clad his mind in it, as if it were ethereal armour. Steeling himself, he plunged into the red fog of the empathic barriers imprisoning the Angel's spirit. Kano felt his brothers at his back, each of them the wind in his sails, lending their might to the task.

Kano screamed, and they all screamed with him. He was aware of seven bright stars flickering

about him, one for each psyker who stood in that far-off place aboard the *Red Tear*, out in the real world.

With a flash, one of the stars burned bright and faded to blackness; Brother Deon was the first to die. He had given his life to take Kano this far, the force of his will spent as the warp-borne curse reacted against the Blood Angels, repelling their attempt to reach their master.

Sorrow engulfed Kano, but he pushed through it, falling deeper. There would be time to mourn the lost when this deed was done, and Deon would not be the last name taken for the Sepulchre of Heroes.

Every step through the red fog was pain, but he could not falter. A dreamscape crowded in around Kano, the head-rush of the endless fall fading into the unreal certainty of ground beneath his feet.

He was in a stygian void, a cavern of impossible dimensions where the only illumination was a sickly band of light falling from a ragged source kilometres above his head. Things wheeled and turned up there, catching the ill glow. They looked like angels of decay and horror. The ray moved across the colossal chamber with the metronomic regularity of a distant lighthouse. Each time it passed over Kano, he felt soiled by it, and he shrank from its touch. The distant stars of his brothers were feeble and indistinct.

Every surface in the cavern was draped with a profusion of cords and threads, some as thin as spun silk, others thicker than the legionary's arm. The threads ran back and forth, snaking over the ground, webbing the air, one atop another in snared knots. They snagged Kano's bare feet as he tried to press forwards, pulled at his arms and whipped over his cheeks. The threads were red and they were black.

The red burned his flesh when he touched them, a seething acidic fire that spread fast and hollowed him out inside. It made Kano dizzy and furious; it conjured a sudden arid thirst in his gut, a hunger he instinctively knew no meat or drink would ever sate. The black seared him with cold harsher than the breath of space and rang a bell-chime echo in the depths of his self; it pulled at an old, directionless anger that was borne of something primal and amorphous in the human soul. A rage waiting to be unleashed.

And there he came upon the Angel Sanguinius. His primarch hung suspended like some hunter's trophy or the art of a cruel sculptor, the web of threads holding him high above the ground. Cords pulled him with wings spread and arms wide in cruciform posture, his face tilted back to bear the pitiless sweep of the light.

Kano climbed, ignoring the pain in his hands and feet, pulling himself up over and over. The ascent went on for days or seconds, time stretching away from him. Then Kano was at the Angel's side, and with no blade to cut the threads he pulled and uncoiled the black and the red, cursing in frustration as he tried to bring freedom to his master.

'Lord, do you hear me?' he gasped.

Sanguinius's eyes snapped open and there was only an ocean of crimson staring back at him. Before he could react, the primarch's mouth split in a snarl, baring bright, sharp fangs.

The Angel pulled Kano into a brutal embrace and bit savagely into the flesh of his neck, piercing the artery. Blood, rich and red and heady with the stink of iron, flowed in a great, unending outburst.

SEVENTEEN

No Turning Back
Cursed
Visions

The Mastodon raced across the war-torn plainsland, rising and falling over blast craters and shallow vales, fording stagnant streams choked with human dead and other, less identifiable remains. Ahead of the transport, the glistening bone towers of the Cathedral of the Mark grew larger, looming across the sky, their barbed points raking the bilious clouds.

Meros was at a broken gun-slit where a shattered lascannon had been mounted; the device was a ruin of torn parts and heat-slagged crystal, too cumbersome even to form a decent club if ripped from its pintle. Foul air gusted in through the breaches in the Mastodon's armour, and he peered out, catching flashes of the fighting all around them.

He saw fury, not warfare. Battle was an ordered thing. Even the close combat that was the speciality of the Blood Angels was a rational and calculated action forged from focus of skill and years of training. What Meros witnessed out there was more akin to the fray of gladiatorial combat, an undisciplined wildfire of warriors moving against anything that dared to stand against them.

Every legionary he laid eyes upon was lost in the thick of their own personal hell, reason far behind them and blood-thirst in full control. He saw battle-brothers he knew, good warriors and proud legionaries, drenched from helm to boot in fresh gore and hungry to take more of it. Seeing it close at hand for the first time, Meros was horrified, and yet he was not shocked. To accept that such a furious heart beat within his chest and those of his kinsmen was not impossible. Perhaps he had always known that this potential was there, glimpsed in the darkest moments and the blackest of rages.

The enemy dead littered the battleground in numbers beyond his reckoning, and ahead of the unkempt berserker advance, the ranks of daemon-things were falling back in clusters. They retreated as the Blood Angels closed a red noose about the temple of bones, the beasts dying in droves.

For all the hollow, empty sense it gave Meros to see it, the sons of Sanguinius were winning the battle for Signus Prime. And all it had taken was to plunge them into the depths of despair.

He wanted to shout to them, to bellow the truth into the vox-channels. *The Angel lives! Our father lives!* But would they heed it even if he did? The blow that felled Sanguinius, the strike that killed five hundred legionaries, had brought something to the surface that would not be so easily silenced.

In the next moment, his reverie was forgotten as a horde of daemonette cavalry crested a rise and bore down on the transport. Their mounts resembled skinned brood-fowls, blind steeds with heads that were nothing but snapping mouths.

Meros shouted a warning and killed the first of the mount-beasts with two rounds into its centre-mass, exploding it in a concussion of purple meat. The rider went down, trampled into the dirt by her companions. Then they were flanking the Mastodon; their bony claws snipped off chunks of flapping

armour as if it were paper.

The Apothecary fired again, but the damaged sponson took up too much of his aim arc and he cursed. Meros turned away and found himself falling in with Leyteo and the Warden as they shouldered open the long gunnery hatches on the transport's roof.

There was no option but to bull their way on through the enemy lines; the Mastodon could not afford to slow down, for fear that the slower enemy units would catch them and overwhelm the transport's meagre defences. The mighty engine roared and spat promethium-laced smoke as they thundered onward.

Leyteo went down on one knee and began a steady pattern of aim-shot-repeat, leading his targets to blast the nymph-like riders out of their saddles. Annellus wielded his crozius, the crackling power field around the winged tip spitting as he swung it in fizzing arcs. He shouted eager defiance to the sky, and Meros gave him room to engage the daemonettes that dared to vault aboard the fast-moving crawler, engaging the riders who dodged Leyteo's pinpoint shots. Engaging the mag-locks in his boots to secure him, Meros leaned into his attack and steadied his pistol with his off-hand, making every shot he fired a kill.

Behind his helmet, his jaw was set in grim determination as he fought, but Meros could not deny that a trickle of bloodlust was forming in his hearts, slowly gaining power. Even with the Niobe woman at close hand, it was hard to resist the need to kill that permeated the very air itself. The closer they came to the cathedral, the worse the sense of it became. He thought of Annellus and Cassiel, caught up in the same turbulent emotions.

He blinked, and his distraction cost him a kill. One of the succubae sprang from its mount, sending the hapless beast to its death beneath the Mastodon's track cluster. She clattered on to the hull using her claws to punch holes in the plating, then coiled and sprang at the black-armoured Warden. Meros shot at it a moment too late, the mass-reactive round deflecting off the deck with a crash of detonation.

In his zeal, Annellus had not engaged the boot-magnets in his armour to hold him fast, and the daemonette batted him off balance with one of her huge arthropod claws. The blow was hard and connected across his helmet. Ceramite cracked, metal splintered, and the skull-mask twisted off him and tumbled away. Revealed beneath, Annellus's face was streaked with blood and fierce with anger. Before he could stop himself, the Warden lost his footing and vanished over the back of the Mastodon's engine compartment, the creature leaping after him with a shriek of joy. Meros twisted in place and emptied the rest of his pistol clip into her back, killing the creature in mid-air.

The Apothecary unlocked and slid toward the rear of the shuddering vehicle. He saw Annellus back on his feet from where he had fallen, rising as the succubae riders whooped, disengaging from the vehicle to surround him.

'Warden!' he shouted, his voice hissing over the vox. Meros called out to the Techmarine at the controls. 'Kaide! Bring us about, Annellus has fallen!'

'No!' The Warden bellowed the word at the top of his lungs. 'Don't stop for me! To the tower, get to the tower!' He spoke again, but Annellus's words became a string of animalistic shouts. As the distance between him and the aura of Tillyan Niobe increased, so did his fury overwhelm him. Meros saw the daemonettes charging, heard the crash of his bolter. Annellus leapt at the closest of the succubae and brought it down in a gush of polluted blood.

'We go onwards,' said Raldoron over the vox.

Kreed listened to the orchestra of murder beyond the walls of the Cathedral of the Mark and closed his eyes. The music of it was strange and powerful to him, and it stirred emotions that he had long thought dead inside him. The Acolyte's life had once been a tapestry of passionate joy and fulfilment at his work in his master's name; then there had come the years of doubt and uncertainty, and now the renewal and rebirth in new purpose. But it was still a difficult time, and there was much to be relearned. Kreed wanted it more than he could express: the thought of taking a place in the Gal Vorbak, of wedding oneself to the mightiest of powers… That inspired him in a way that nothing in his life ever had. But he could not deny he had reservations. Not doubts, because those were things for weaklings. *Concerns*, perhaps. Matters he wished to understand before he took that final step.

He pushed past Captain Harox, who had wisely decided to maintain his brooding silence, and moved from the edge of the chamber. Kreed knew that the powers of the warp were so much greater than the mere meat and blood of beings like himself, and in the merging with one of them he might gain the kind of mastery that the serpent Erebus enjoyed. But as he watched the creatures Kyriss and Ka'Bandha goad one another, he wondered. *They are not superior,* Kreed thought. *They're like us*. He smiled; this pleased him. When the time came, he would use that understanding to control his new power.

'My serviles are all but extinguished,' said the king-queen, wavering as it circled the pit in the floor. 'I lavished so much upon them, and you have spent their lives in hours!'

The great Bloodthirster cocked its bull-head in callous amusement. 'Their deaths oil the cogs of war's engine,' he rumbled. 'What else are they for, indolent?'

Kyriss's clawed foot stamped in bitter annoyance. 'No, no, no! This is not the way! These cults, thrice-blessed in worship to Slaanesh, are not yours to squander. What kind of victory is this, killer? It is not only my loves that die, but the beasts of your army as well! Tell me, will the Blood God be pleased that you give up his minions so easily?' The androgynous daemon waved its talons at the great circular window, and the battle raging beneath them. 'Our serfs perish in their droves and you stand here and watch it happen. I turned these blighted human nests to the glory of the Ruinous Powers not for my own amusement, but for the promise of a greater victory. A larger plan in the Long War. Not for this!'

'I know,' spat Ka'Bandha, irritation marbling its tone. 'I know what you were told.' It leered toward Kreed with a mouth full of barbed fangs, as if daring him to offer an opinion. The Word Bearer kept his silence, waiting to see how the confrontation would play out.

'Nothing seems to stop them, they are enraged beyond measure. Why do you let these Blood Whelps approach so closely?' Kyriss demanded. 'Your legions fall back and fall back. Soon these abhumans will be at our gates!'

The Bloodthirster released a hollow growl that might have been an attempt at a sigh. 'Very soon,' the winged beast sneered. 'Pleasure-laggard, fool and wastrel. You are blind and stupid!' Ka'Bandha hawked and angrily spat a plug of black matter against the bone floor, where it bubbled and frothed.

'What is it doing?' muttered Harox, breaking his silence at last.

'Don't speak,' said Kreed.

'You think your perverse games and little dramas are the fulcrum for the war, but you understand nothing.' Ka'Bandha shook a fist at the pink-skinned creature. 'You hide here in your palace, but I have been out there. I traded blows with this man-prey.' The Bloodthirster's feral jaws opened in a predatory smile. 'And I tell you this. The "legionaries" die hard. I've tasted their fury, and I know

they will not be beaten by force of arms alone.'

Kyriss made a negative noise. 'You actually *admire* these ephemerals.'

Ka'Bandha ignored the reply. 'The difference between us, coxcomb, is that I know how to defeat them.' The daemon let its long tongue flick out and trace over its teeth, once again casting a jaundiced eye toward Kreed. 'The sons of the Angel will be undone by their own flaw, and they will come to it drenched in the blood of their enemies. If we must sacrifice an army, a whole world for that, it is a price that shall be paid.'

'And Sanguinius's death is the key…' It was a moment before Kreed realised that he had spoken.

The androgyne Kyriss turned on him, snarling. 'Insolent insect! That is not our masters' plan!'

'No,' said Ka'Bandha, a breaking-stone chuckle crackling inside its broad chest. 'It is not.'

Raldoron gave the order to abandon the Mastodon when the transport became fouled in a nest of writhing tentacular masses at the foot of the bone temple. The Blood Angels deployed from the vehicle in rough order, forming into squads with wary, grim precision. The captain spared the woman Niobe a look. Her face was smeared with soot and she stumbled along at Meros's side, sweating as she tried to keep pace with them.

Raldoron caught the Apothecary's eye and nodded towards her, reminding him of his obligation to keep the pariah alive.

Huge crowds of aberrant creatures milled around the base of the massive cathedral in roaming packs, the flesh-hounds and the harriers snarling and barking at one another as they waited for the final attack to come.

Quick and clean, the legionaries advanced up a shallow incline toward the walls of ragged bone. The glowing haze was at its thickest here, the fog making it hard to see anything beyond a few metres distance. Preysight and light-modified visual settings through the optics of Raldoron's combat helmet were no improvement. The sensors in his warplate constantly gave off erroneous data and filled the vision blocks with heat bloom. In the end, in irritation, he twisted off his helm and snapped it to the magnetic clasp on his hip. Without the breath grille to filter the tainted air, the thick, cloying odour of it gathered at the back of his throat. It tasted greasy and foul, like burned, spoiled fat left too long on a griddle.

They avoided the larger groups of the creatures, but it was necessary to quickly terminate smaller packs of the hellhounds that came sniffing after them, their low, nasal whines cutting the fog as they reacted to Niobe's presence.

Pausing in the shadow of a broken spar of rockcrete, the First Captain scanned the tower rising up above them.

'You *do* have a plan?' Cassiel made the question sound like an accusation, and Raldoron's first instinct was to rebuke him for his tone. Instead he held his tongue. The veteran went on. 'Or do we just walk in through the gates of this abomination and ask to be taken to their leader?'

'Orexis has cutting charges,' he replied tersely. 'We'll make our own damned doorway.'

'Does he have enough to bring this bloody place down? I doubt it.'

Raldoron glared at the sergeant. 'Just follow orders, Cassiel. Leave the rest to me.' His hand slipped to the pouch on his belt and he tapped it lightly, making sure that the targeting beacon secreted within was still there. The device had been placed in his hand by Azkaellon before he left the *Red Tear*, and he remembered the Guard Commander's severe expression as he explained how it would

function, if the need arose.

He looked up into the sky, and saw only the sallow clouds. Somewhere up there, set in position at high anchor away from the slow burn of battle that still raged on in orbit, the *Scarlet Liberty* was drifting with its bow aimed at the planet, lance cannons primed and missile batteries loaded and ready. Although the starship's targeting sensors were blinded by the unusual atmospheric effects of Signus Prime's corrupted skies, they would still – it was hoped – be able to see the beacon's trace should Raldoron activate it. If triggered, in less than ninety seconds a hail of death from above would fall upon his location and obliterate everything – daemons, legionaries and the mysterious source of corruption Kano had spoken of.

That was the last-ditch plan, at least. To begin with, Raldoron had hoped it would not come to that, but now as he neared the objective, he wondered if it would simply be better to push the button *now* and let fate choose for them. This war, it had all become too supernatural for his liking, too mythic and surreal.

He frowned, annoyed at himself, and shook off the thought.

'Captain!' From nearby, Meros called out to him in a low hiss. 'You should see this.'

Raldoron broke cover and moved fast and low, dodging between the ruined stubs of walls. The rise where the beasts had built their great temple was uneven, dotted with irregular patches of stone and broken roadway. The captain realised that the remains of a city lay beneath his feet, the buildings and streets cut back to almost nothing, threshed to their roots like crops cut by scythes. The Cathedral of the Mark was built on a mass grave, on a world that was littered with them.

Raldoron approached the Apothecary. Niobe was crouched close at hand, half-hidden in the shadow cast by Brother Racine, who stood with his bolter to his shoulder.

A trail of thick, dark blood crossed the dusty ground and pooled in the lee of a twisted stone pillar. Despite the cloying cocktail of rank odours on the breeze, the captain's senses picked out the texture of a familiar trace: the blood of a legionary. The heavy, metallic smell was distinct and unpleasantly familiar, a scent-memory embedded in the recall of a thousand battles.

But not that of a Blood Angel. This too he knew instinctively. Meros moved and revealed the body of a warrior in steel-grey armour, the pelt of a great canine wrapped about him, the off-white fur now clumped with the vitae that had saturated it.

The Rune Priest's body lay slumped against the pillar, a blade just out of reach where it had fallen from his numb fingers. His injuries were ugly: his throat was ragged and open, rough cuts and savage bite marks across his neck and face. The telltale points of sword strikes were visible all over his armour, each one deep and crusted with wet scabs. The legionary had dragged himself away across the wastes, leaving a ruby trail in his wake as his bio-implants had tried and failed to stem the tide of blood loss.

'This is Jonor Stiel,' said Meros. 'He was Redknife's battle-brother.'

Without warning, the Space Wolf's eyes snapped open, as if he had been at rest, only waiting for someone to speak his name. Fresh jolts of fluid jerked from the murderous neck wound and crimson spittle foamed from his lips, soaking into his pale beard.

Raldoron stepped back in surprise as Meros drew up his medicae gauntlet, the mechanism whirring as he selected a drug philtre. But even as the Apothecary did so, the First Captain knew it was a hollow gesture.

The look of pure, unadulterated hatred in Stiel's eyes was chilling. He glared at Meros and spat full

in his face. The act was done with a cold, measured force of will and Raldoron suspected that the Space Wolf had been clinging on to his last skein of life just long enough to execute it.

Even as the light faded in his eyes, Stiel said something in the guttural, hard-edged vowels of his native tongue, a string of what could only be the most base and odious invective his people could voice.

'He's cursing us,' said Raldoron, watching the Space Wolf die. 'He blames us for this.'

'You speak his language?' said Racine.

'I don't need to.'

The Rune Priest's body stilled, and Meros reached out to close his eyes. The Apothecary looked toward the captain. 'His wounds–'

Raldoron silenced him with a shake of the head, but the unspoken words echoed in his thoughts. *His wounds were not caused by the enemy.*

'Gather the legionaries,' he told Racine. 'We move on.'

Halerdyce Gerwyn awoke to screaming, and he was uncertain if the nightmare had ended, or if it had just been renewed in a different guise.

He stumbled from the pallet where he had collapsed what seemed like an age ago, finding the survivors and the ship crew fleeing from the decrepit metal chamber in abject panic. The remembrancer saw people trampled, vanishing as they dropped out of sight, slammed against the metal deck. He tried to resist as the press of bodies surged towards him, but he had nowhere else to go. Gerwyn stumbled and fell into a run with them. To resist would have seen him crushed.

Flowing like a tide, the humans boiled out into the *Red Tear*'s avenue-wide corridors and broke apart. The crowd went this way and that, desperation in their cries. He saw the old man, Zhomas, swept past in a flash. He was bleeding from a gash across his cheek, and stark fear robbed him of any sense of self.

Gerwyn tried to call out, but he struck a girder support and became dizzy, falling away from the crush long enough to gain some semblance of his bearings.

The corridor where he stood was open to the polluted sky, and in its murky depths he saw winged monstrosities angling down toward them, drawn by the stink of fear. Gerwyn had seen these winged furies before, in the tormented dreams and half-glimpsed visions that he had compulsively sketched on his pict-tablet. He had known even then that those things were real. The mass of them in his thoughts, the weight and facet, such details could only come from something that existed.

It did not matter that they defied nature and reason with their existence; that was what they were. A manifestation of unreality, bursting into this world like a bloom of madness.

Out there, he saw flashes of gold and red, racing to meet the daemons. *The Blood Angels*. The last legionaries onboard the ship had left them behind, abandoned the weak and the defenceless to rise to the fight. The remembrancer's gut turned to ice and his legs trembled. He had seen that in the dreams as well, the full number of the warrior kindred possessed by a rage so great that they trampled the very men and women they were meant to defend in their rush to give themselves to battle. Guard Commander Azkaellon's face ghosted through his thoughts; he had seen an apparition of that grim visage lit by a ferocity burning cold and eternal.

Gerwyn pounded the flat of his palms against his face, muttering denials over and over. If this was real, and the dream was the dream, which was worse? 'This place is horror!' he shouted, the words

sputtering from his lips, tears streaking his face. The remembrancer felt his will breaking inside him, the fear – the colossal, monolithic fear – crushing him with its weight. He was going to die and there was nothing for him to do but wait for the moment.

Young, strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders and he was shaken roughly. 'Snap out of it!' shouted a voice.

Gerwyn looked up through misted eyes and saw the soldier from the Fasadian Infantry, the one called Dortmund. He seemed every inch the raw youth pressed into an older man's uniform, unready for the dangers of a battle beyond his experience.

'The trap closes,' muttered the remembrancer, uncertain of where the words were coming from. 'This is our end. They have abandoned us to perish.'

'No–' began Dortmund, but his words became a sudden, shill cry as his back arched. His eyes went wide as a serrated blade burst from his chest, rusted and dull with the action of many past murders upon it. The weapon was withdrawn, a wet sucking chug of blood going with it, and Dortmund dropped to the deck.

The muscular, thuggish survivor who had come with the rest of the Scoltrum evacuees stood with a dripping knife in his fist. Gerwyn backed away, but the girders hemmed him in.

Over the big man's shoulders he saw the furies alighting on the spars of broken hull metal, claws and teeth rattling as they were drawn by the scent of blood.

'This was always how your story was going to end,' said Hengist, his eyes alight with fervour in the moment before he buried his blade in the remembrancer's heart.

The daemon Kyriss scuttled across the bone floor with a high-pitched yelp and came at Tanus Kreed in a flash of talons and noise. Harox was drawing his sword, more by reflex than by forethought, coming to his defence, but it meant little. The creature batted the Word Bearers captain away and sent him tumbling over the skull-tiles, dangerously close to the edge of the great pit. Kreed hesitated a moment too long going for his own weapon, and then it was too late. Kyriss's massive crab-claw snapped open and caught him between its barbs.

'Pathetic meat,' it spat. 'What have you done? You provoke this? Your arrogant godling primarchs dare to leave the path we cut for them?'

Kreed grabbed at the claw, holding it back. It took most of his strength, and he feared that Kyriss could make short work of him if it wished, closing the vice to snip his head clean from his neck. He shot a look at the Bloodthirster, but the other beast merely grinned at the sport of it.

'Child of Slaanesh,' growled Ka'Bandha, making the title a mocking slur, 'you spend so long playing your games upon silken beds and in whispering halls, you forget that the pieces sometimes have minds of their own.'

Kyriss gave a petulant grunt and released Kreed, shaking him off. 'I am the player of games, not the played!' it shouted, the rise of its voice screeching off the walls.

'The obvious escapes you,' said the Bloodthirster. 'Our masters wish the Angel to come to our banner, and bring his army into the schism. The Warmaster does not. Open your eyes, fool! The souls of these abhumans are clear even to one as blunt as I! The Warmaster does not wish to stand in the shadow of his angelic brother again! Sanguinius must be killed, and to be killed he must first be broken.'

'No, no,' Kyriss shook its head. 'The Angel comes to us! That was the agreement! With him we

have all we need, and the advance begins. That is how it will be done!'

'Warmaster Horus begs to differ,' managed Kreed, picking himself up from the ground. 'I submit to you that no matter how much power you bring to him, you will never rule his heart.' He coughed, spitting blood. 'Perhaps your gods did not choose as wisely as they thought.'

'Silence, animal!' Kyriss shouted him down, then wheeled to sputter at the Bloodthirster. 'What pact have you made without me? Speak now! Reveal it!'

'The Angel will die today,' intoned Ka'Bandha, drawing his great axe and weighing it in his hand. 'One wound to fell him, one more to end him.' He licked the edge of the weapon. 'It will be sweet. At the end, he will beg me for it.'

Kyriss snorted. 'He is prideful. He would never submit!'

'He is *brittle*!' Ka'Bandha snapped. 'We have set his sons to madness and fury. Answer me this – once they have killed every servile cultist and lesser spawn on this blighted plain, what will they kill next? When their bloodlust has been stoked so high that they see nothing but the scarlet path and the red joy of murder, who will die *then*?'

'The Blood Angels will turn upon each other…' The skinless, sinuous daemon said the words with growing relish.

The Bloodthirster's grotesque snout bobbed. 'And only the most brutal, the most blood-hungry of them, will survive. The essence of their pure souls burned away until only the mindless beast remains.' He extended his clawed hand, as if in a gesture of twisted, abhorrent comradeship. Upon the beast's upturned palm, Kreed saw a complex glyph of angular lines crossing one another; the writhing, burning shape of the sigil hurt him to look upon it. 'In that moment I will offer them the Mark of Khorne, and they will take it without hesitation. Can you imagine the heart of the Angel in that moment, Kyriss? How his love for his sons will strangle him with a flood of the bleakest despair? His heart will break and the Blood God will have a new army.'

'And the Angel will weep.' Kyriss licked its lips, savouring the thought, wavering between his orders and this new possibility. 'That *would* be delectable.'

Ka'Bandha nodded, then pointed at the other daemon. 'Of course, that flesh-proxy you wear will need to die along the way. But your essence will be freed to return to the warp through the meat-death.'

'*What*?' Kyriss's pinkish-grey flesh flushed red with renewed fury, the pendulum of its manner swinging back toward anger. 'No! I am no sacrifice for this maggot! I am the mistress-master, high beast and exalted! I did not manifest in this place to be manipulated like some ephemeral. The Warmaster will obey!'

'You're wrong,' said Kreed, finding a new boldness with the words. 'The Bloodthirster sees it, even if you do not. You underestimate the Warmaster at your cost, daemon. Your champion has plans of his own that you will *never* be able to control.'

He opened his eyes and rose from his knees, red sand swirling about him with every movement. Kano staggered forwards, and pain was his reward. Each footstep across the rust-coloured stone was knives jammed into his chest.

He marched on his agony, clad only in a hooded fighting surplice. Blood sluiced from his body, fat red droplets of it tapping out a cadence across the stonework, painting his path.

So much blood. Could the body hold such a volume? Kano was wet with it, the slow and constant

flow from the seeping punctures in his throat. *I should be dead*. The stream was steady as rainfall. *It should have stopped. It should stop!* The healer implant, the organ of Larraman, was failing him. *The wounds should have clotted and closed by now*! Kano had never bled for so long. He did not understand why he was still alive. He did not understand where he was.

Out beyond the arches of the endless cloister he saw a burned, post-nuclear desert and, closer to hand, the towers of a fallen citadel and the broken stubs of shattered statues. This was Baal, the home world of the Blood Angels, and he was walking the ruins of their fortress-monastery.

But that was not so. *Baal thrived! The fortress was intact and whole, the Legion strong and steady–*

But not here. In his bones, Kano felt an uncountable weight of ages, a span of time and distance so broad he could not measure it. The bleak sky over his head was filled with dying suns and only a handful shone brightly, clustered as if watching over him.

This was not *now*, he realised. He was looking into an age unhappened, a vision of a remote tomorrow ten or twenty or a hundred thousand years hence.

Is this all that will remain of us? The question chilled him. *Ruins and dust?*

The nerves in Kano's bare feet caught fire and he staggered back, glancing downwards to find the source of the pain. There, snaking away along the unending cloister, were two thick ropes of heavy, woven silk. One black, one red.

He stooped awkwardly to gather them up, flinching at the pain that coursed through his hands at their touch. Hissing, Kano pulled at the cords and threaded them between his stiffening fingers.

I have to follow. He was here for a reason. *I have to see.* He was here to see something. *To find someone.*

The bright stars dazzled his eyes. He looked up at them and felt his world turn suddenly, inverting, the walls of the stone arcade becoming drenched in blackness.

Through the far arch the red rock became dark metal whorled with quivering, ever-shifting glyphs. The passageway had changed. Now it was a portal into a different place, a scene that sickened Kano to observe it.

A ship, a throne room, a mad lord's lair. He saw a baleful eye with a slit black pupil against a blood-crimson field and beneath it a great portal looking down upon a world that could only be Terra. Fires in the space around it. Ships burning in their thousands. A war of unspeakable ferocity, but all of it rendered insignificant by the two titans who faced each other alone across the blood-streaked deck.

One, a god in gold and platinum with laurels about his head and a sword made of righteous fury in his hand, a being of such majesty that Kano was thrown to his knees by the aura of his perfection.

The Emperor, beloved by all.

The other, night-clad in black iron and brass, glowering and tall like a war engine wearing the face of a man, the skulls of dead heroes jangling from his belt, a great claw clasping at the air and a spiked mace raised high.

Warmaster Horus, traitor son.

Kano saw and knew it could not be happening. He saw it and he knew it did happen, would happen, will happen, could happen.

Sword crossed armour and fell away in sparks. The Warmaster shouted defiance at his father and shattered the blade with his mace. Incredibly, the Emperor staggered beneath the blow.

And then with a sound like mountains colliding, the Warmaster's leviathan claw pierced the

Emperor's armour and he bled fire. Son murdered father, and Kano watched it occur, the shock of the sight turning him to stone.

He was not there.

When Kano opened his eyes everything was different.

Gone were the black iron walls of the battle-barge and in their place he saw the polished marble of the Imperial Palace's crystal arboria, the air full of smouldering flowers and the great crystalflex dome raining down in fragments. Above, a cluster of bright burning stars. Only five now.

Joy surged in him to see the Angel, alive, in full force and presence, storming forwards with a glittering spear in his grip, his wings rising high and wide in gales of white. At Sanguinius's back, an army of his battle-brothers with fury chained for war.

They ran toward a battle host of dark armour and screaming, horned faces. At the head of the enemy legion, shouting curses in dead languages, Horus stood wreathed in a stygian cloak.

Sanguinius gave a shout and hurled the spear with such force that a sonic boom shocked across the ruined gardens. The blade-tip fell true, piercing the black-slit eye upon the Warmaster's chest. Horus perished, his body erupting into flames.

His brother is dead.

Everything was different.

Now the ruins of Signus Prime returned to his sight, the great bone temple no more than an ossuary heap, skeletons slagged to black ash by warp-fire.

A new monument to horror stood in its stead, alike to the trees of the world called Murder, a scaffold built of dead legionaries. Four stars shone down upon it. Around its base stood the last of the Blood Angels, each chipping at their armour, defacing the wings of the aquila that they once bore so proudly. Etching instead, with acid and broken swords, a new shape. Angle upon angle, heavy thick lines that resembled an iron skull, a throne for a God of Blood. Consecrating their new, heretic loyalty over the bodies of their dead brothers and the broken spirit of their father.

His Legion falls to hell.

A blink of reality and nothing was the same.

And so again, in the halls of the *Vengeful Spirit*, as Sanguinius struck out at his brother, cutting a fearsome crack in the Warmaster's nigh-impregnable armour. But it was not enough, and the Angel's great red blade broke. Warmaster Horus's monstrous claw clasped at Sanguinius's throat and Kano felt it about his own. The Angel's bones shattered as the life was crushed from him. Another star flared and faded.

He dies there.

The world changed.

A chamber of kings once more, but on no world Kano knew. A crowd of warriors from a dozen Legions gathered, in colours across the spectrum under pennants of glory and promise. The Angel and a cluster of his brothers, solemn and determined in equal measure. Overhead, a star died.

Legionaries, humans and primarchs, all of them bowed to Sanguinius as he sat himself upon the throne of empire, the laurel about his head.

Kano reached out, but the only word on his lips was 'master'.

He is Emperor.

And the cloister returned, the sand and the endless sound of the winds; but this was not a distant tomorrow. It was far closer. He saw the gates to the caverns beneath Baal's red desert, where the Hall of Heroes resided. The last star slowly dimmed.

Kano heard the Angel's voice. *I dreamed of you, my friend.* He spoke of Raldoron, and Kano saw the First Captain crossing the corridor. A majestic grav-litter of gold and ruby followed him. *I saw you on Baal. You were in the caverns beneath the fortress-monastery. You were filled with pride.*

And Raldoron *was* proud; but he wept with it and bore a black band of mourning across his arm. He led the body of their father towards its final resting place.

He will die.

Kano opened his eyes for the last time and beheld a warrior in heavy, archaic armour glistening with wet crimson and hellish radiance, raised aloft by a pair of massive wings drenched in vitae, every feather dripping with tainted blood.

A screaming, red-stained angel.

EIGHTEEN

In the Company of Death
Ragefire
Vengeance

The red tide broke upon the walls of the great cathedral with unspeakable violence and the clash of a hundred thousand weapons. Leaderless and out of control, the Blood Angels acted on lethal instinct, converging at the towers of bone with only one impulse powering them forward. Hate drove them into the cohorts of bloodletters and succubae defending the approaches to the temple, and they tore the daemonic creatures into shreds. The sons of Sanguinius were no longer a Legion, but a force of nature laying waste to everything that stood in their way.

Bolters screamed and filled the air with fycelene smoke and explosive fire; and when the guns ran dry they became clubs, or else they were forgotten in favour of blades and chainswords, battle mauls and power fists. Space Marines, Terminators and Dreadnoughts united in one single emotion: *rage*.

That fury manifested itself in a need for blood, an unquenchable thirst for the spilling of their enemy's life essence. The pitiful colonists of Signus Prime – the ones who had not the fortune to die quickly for sake of the gargantuan ossuary or to turn to the perverse worship of the hell-cults – had been the meat upon which the daemons had built new bodies for themselves. Every flight of furies, every harrier or foot soldier beast had been reborn from a man or woman who had once been wholly human. The lesser daemons could not manifest completely in this place, and so it was that they needed meat to clothe their twisted soul-energies. The warp spawn inhabited them, malformed them, made them flesh-proxy.

But that flesh could bleed, and it could die. On the steps of the Cathedral of the Mark, the Blood Angels painted the ground red.

Perhaps it had taken them an eternity, or perhaps the blink of an eye. Time seemed malleable inside the bone temple, moving in fits and starts instead of linear progression. Meros had lost count of the number of creatures they had dispatched as they climbed the wide spiralling staircase that rose up inside the central tower. As before, when they had flown across the battle zone towards the cathedral, they seemed to move without travelling, and more than once he wondered if it were all some trick of the mind.

It was Niobe who showed them the way. He carried her, for she could not keep up with their pace, hoisting her to his shoulder in the way a parent might cradle a child. The woman lost her voice – through fear or something else, he could not be sure – but she pointed this way and that, directing them along arcades of bone and through the endless passages. The beasts looked through her, ignoring them, and Raldoron used the advantage well, killing anything that could threaten them.

But as they came to the tall, wavering curtains of tanned human flesh, Niobe let out a whimper,

which became a sob and then a cry, low and pained. Blood flowed freely from her nostrils.

Guns and swords drawn, the legionaries stormed into the chamber and found the masters of the horrors they had been fighting for so long.

There were two of them: one was the bat-winged bastard that had struck down the Angel and taken the lives of Nakir's company, the other the serpent-goat freak that had dared to challenge the primarch on the bridge of his flagship. Meros had never felt any hatred as righteous as the one that burst inside him at that moment. The reaction was pure: these creatures were simply *not supposed to exist*. All he wanted at that moment was to make that a certainty.

The Bloodthirster reacted with a roar of fury and flew at them across the pit in the centre of the chamber, black wings snapping as it soared up and dove down at the legionaries.

Raldoron shouted the order to scatter and the warriors broke apart in a flurry of motion. Meros shoved Niobe into cover as Orexis moved with him, both Blood Angels turning as they ran to fire at the screeching daemon lord.

The one that called itself Ka'Bandha landed like an earthquake and struck out with axe and whip. Meros saw Racine and two more battle-brothers sliced open. He shouted and fired at the beast's head, aiming for its eyes, but the creature blocked the shots with the flat of its massive axe.

Spears of fire erupted into being as the legionaries released a salvo of plasma bolts at the monster's torso and its gnarled legs, shots striking home in flash-cracks of burned, rotten tissue and oily fluids. It roared as the warriors hurled fire into its path, stomping forward and taking the hits as if it relished the brutality of the pain.

The other beast-lord, the thing Kyriss, danced and spun at the far side of the chamber, giggling and braying with harsh amusement as it watched the fight unfold. Close to the sallow-fleshed monster, Meros glimpsed figures that rang a wrong note in his mind. He saw two warriors of the Legiones Astartes, silhouetted in the daemon's repellent aura. The armour was unmistakable, Mark IV warplate.

But the colour was wrong. These were not Blood Angels. He could make out what looked like odd runic texts carved into the defaced ceramite, and where there should have been a sanctioned sigil of the Imperial Legions upon their shoulder pauldron there was only the grotesque icon of a howling devil-face.

'Kreed,' hissed Sergeant Orexis, recognising the traitors. 'Harox. They dare show themselves…'

Any lingering doubts about the alliance between the Word Bearers and the architects of the Signus atrocity melted away and Meros cursed them. He went to take aim, but a group of horn-crested monsters clambered out of the glowing pit, hellblades burning in their claws. They rushed forward to join the Bloodthirster, cutting at the air and roaring.

Raldoron and the rest of the squad retaliated, splitting their fire between the great monster and its soldier-minions. The brass whip cracked like thunder and more men died. Crimson-skinned daemons scuttled forward, stabbing as they went, wailing as they tasted the aura of Niobe's null-zone about them.

The First Captain vaulted from cover and killed one, blowing it apart. 'Orexis!' he shouted. 'Converge fire on the leader!' He shot Meros a glare. 'The witch-mind! Bring her, keep her close! She pains them!'

The Apothecary turned to Niobe, who shook her head violently. 'No,' she cried. 'Don't you hear him?' The female suddenly grabbed at Meros's arm and looked at him with wild eyes. 'Can't you hear

him screaming?'

'Come with me,' he insisted. 'I will keep you safe–'

'You can't save him!' Niobe shouted. 'They have already killed him a million times over!' Her hand jerked, and she pointed furiously up toward the apex of the tower above. 'There is nothing left!'

Both Meros and Raldoron looked where she indicated and saw the massive brass-and-crystal mechanism hanging from its tethers above them, swaying as eldritch energy flicked around its corners. It seemed to waver and then grow clearer, as if Niobe's scrutiny made it more real. The thick crimson mist inside was swirling with turbulence, almost as if it were trying to escape from the confines of the arcane capsule.

'Look what they have done to him!' yelled Niobe, tears streaking her smoke-dirty face. 'Can you not see?'

The light from the haze touched the anger kindling in Meros's hearts and he remembered the moment on the battlefield when Ka'Bandha had shackled the same force to kill a whole company of his brothers. Kano had spoken of a source to all the fury and pain that cast its shadow over the Signus Cluster, and there was no doubt in the legionary's mind that at this moment, he looked upon it.

He could not describe it, the emotion that ran through him with such stark force. It was beyond fear and know-ledge, beyond certainty. Meros had no experience with which to frame this understanding. He simply knew that this thing had to be destroyed.

It was then he saw the face.

The boiling, churning mist gathered and thickened, and for one brief instant it tried to make the shape of a man. But not a man. A legionary. *A Blood Angel*.

The half-formed image wavered, as if it could not quite remember how to hold itself solid, but it was enough for Raldoron to utter a vehement Baalite curse, enough for the blood to drain from the First Captain's face in a moment of ghastly *recognition*.

'I know him,' Raldoron husked. 'In the Throne's name, it is Tagas! The captain of the 111th!'

'No,' Meros shook his head. 'That cannot be… Captain Tagas died on One-Forty-Twenty, the world called Murder.' He remembered the memorial scrolls upon the *Red Tear*'s honour wall, Tagas's name there along with all the others. 'It's a trick!'

'His body was never recovered,' said Raldoron, emotion choking his words. 'I knew him better than any battle-brother in the Legion! I swear it is he! He is trapped–'

Even as he said the words, the face in the red mist broke apart and it became inchoate again, as if the essence of fury had been distilled into an elemental mass and contained, chained like the sun-bright plasma of a fusion reactor's core. The brief moment of coherence was lost forever.

An instinct drew Meros's line of sight back toward the creature Kyriss, its doe-eyed gaze meeting his for a brief instant. It laughed at him, great mocking shakes of its muscular torso resonating out in chugs of derision from its bovine snout. Meros glimpsed the unending cruelty in that predatory stare and knew that Raldoron was not mistaken. 'I think they killed him long ago, captain. They have bound him into that infernal device.'

'Can you hear his screams?' said Niobe. 'What have they done to him?'

A brother of their Legion, a dead legionary yet undying, and these monsters had committed their greatest act of desecration upon him. If anything of Tagas had still remained, it was the wisp of a soul, the faintest echo of what he once had been, and he had spent it on warning them of what they were about to face.

Kano came back, and the transition was punishing. His thoughts were a jumble of incoherent images and half-felt emotions, pieces of his self left scattered in the trail of a rough awakening. He had been so close to his master's thoughts, barely touching the trapped mind of the primarch, but then it had all gone away. His connection snapped, broken into flaming threads. The dream-realm and the visions, the strange future scenes he had witnessed, all were dragged back into nothing and Kano was ejected from the ethereal.

Reality interposed itself on him with crushing force and the legionary collapsed to the deck, his hands flat upon the metal floor of the medicae chamber. The odour of burned flesh and hot ash stung his nostrils and he blinked, trying to see through rheumy eyes. Kano heard a low, gasping moan and raised his head. He was so *weak*; there was barely enough energy in him to take a breath. The meta-concert of minds had drained him to the marrow.

He looked up to see Ecanus sink to his knees, a fountain of arterial blood spurting up from a grotesque wound in his neck. Kano's trusted friend and battle-brother died then, the light fading from his eyes, his body toppling forwards to land in a heap.

Ecanus was not the only one. The others had perished, but in a manner more horrific, more fantastic. Salvator, Novenus, Deon, all of them were burned grey effigies of themselves, their bodies consumed from within by uncontrolled psi-fire. His brothers had surrendered themselves to project his consciousness into Sanguinius's mind, through the veil of darkness – and all for nought.

Kano tried to rise, and he saw how Ecanus had been killed. A figure stood over the dead psyker, a human with a mad gaze and a heavy blade in his hand.

Murder, then, not sacrifice.

A legionary's blood glistened on the knife, but as Kano watched the metal seemed to drink it in, absorbing the vitae into itself. The man was one of the survivors Meros had recovered from Scoltrum. Just a man, an ordinary human being.

And yet he had killed a Space Marine, tearing open poor Ecanus as he drifted insensate in the depths of a psychic trance. A coward's assault.

'I will… end you for that…' Kano struggled, unable to gain a footing. Anger flashed in his eyes. His body refused to obey him. 'Why…?'

'This is always how it was going to end,' said the man, and there was an echo under his words, as if another voice was making him parrot its own speech. 'Hengist was always loyal, embedded from the start, born and raised to obey. A weapon-son, a piece upon the board placed to be ready.' Suddenly his face twisted in a leering, snarl. 'I always knew!' He shouted the words, spittle flying from his lips. 'Hengist and Lutgardis, Horsa and Phyria, the cult-brothers were ready.' The blade came up; now it was clean. 'Always ready,' he muttered.

Kano watched him pull back the hood over his scalp and saw where the man had cut a ring studded with eight points into his forehead. Ecanus's killer stalked towards him around the cruciform dais where the primarch still lay, silent and unmoving.

The warrior dragged himself to his knees, pulling at a pillar to support his weight. This madman would murder him as he had murdered Ecanus, striking when he was weakened and unable to fight back. Sanguinius would never be re-awakened.

Kano lost his grip and crashed back to the floor. His vision blurred and he tried desperately to pull himself away from the moment, from the betrayal of his flesh toward the eternal strength of his soul.

'You will die now,' said the madman.

‘You first,’ grated Kano, as his thoughts touched a burning kernel of power lost and deep inside his spirit. A power he had kept corralled for far too long.

The psyker raised his hand and *let go*. The air shrieked as a crackling bolt of ruby lightning erupted from Kano’s palm and strobed across the chamber. Hengist exploded even before he could scream in pain, blood and meat vaporising in a wet mist that darkened the floor and ceiling. After-light energy discharged randomly, crawling across the metal decking, short-circuiting sense monitors and biolume stacks.

It could have been a hundred years before Kano dragged himself from the compartment, lurching into the corridor. He fell against the walls, stumbling like a drunkard. Signus Prime’s wan light spilled into the broken passageway, the dust in the reeking air coating the bodies of the dead that littered the floor. Human corpses lay everywhere he looked, and sat upon the chests of some of them were winged harpies feasting upon their cooling meat.

The creatures spat when they saw Kano coming. They burst into frantic flight, wings droning as they spun out into the dead sky through the places where the *Red Tear*’s hull had been ripped away.

Kano stumbled again, falling against the broken wall. It took all he had in him to come this far. He wanted to drop to the deck and slumber, let the lull of his sus-an membrane overtake his taxed body and rest. To do so would be to admit the truth.

‘I have failed…’ he breathed. The promise he had made – to give his all to reach out to the mind of his primarch, trapped there in a cage of tormented visions – that promise had crumbled beyond his grasp, and the very warriors who might have turned the tide of this war lay dead because of it. He had been so close. Just a few moments more, if Ecanus had not been killed…

All around him the empty halls of the grounded battle-barge were mute witness to this unfolding truth. His brothers were gone, the *Red Tear* abandoned as the great thirst for blood had finally overwhelmed the Legion. Kano peered at the distant tower of the hellish cathedral. The tower of bone was calling to him as it had called to them all. It would be the monument to their ending.

A tide of wretched misery swept over Kano, so great that it robbed him of his breath. ‘I have failed my Legion. My kinsmen. My primarch.’ He closed his eyes to the shame of it.

‘You have not.’

Kano jerked, eyes snapping open as if bolting awake from the deepest sleep. Despite the chill and the foetor of the air, despite the bleak radiance of the Signusi stars bleeding through the sickly sky, there was bright amber and shining white before him.

A towering figure, a mythic form carved by light and forged from gold and crimson. Sanguinius stood over him, the Angel’s expression that of a father filled with all the conflicting emotions his soul could contain. Pride and sorrow, dread and elation, these and a hundred more.

‘My lord,’ Kano whispered, afraid to believe it. He reached out to touch the primarch’s arm. This was no vision; his fingers met sun-warmed ceramite.

For a moment, the greatest sadness weighed the Angel’s patrician face. ‘You gave much to bring me back, my son. You paid a high cost.’

‘We did what we thought was right…’

He raised a hand to silence him. ‘We’ll speak of that, but not now.’ He frowned. ‘Where are your brothers, Kano?’

The legionary raised a weary hand and pointed toward the Cathedral of the Mark.

Sanguinius nodded gravely, his amber eyes surveying the wreckage around them with dismay. 'Look at what has been wrought here, set in motion by lies.' He stumbled back on his injured legs, his powerful wings unfurling to their fullest extent. 'I swear to you, it will go no further.' Kano's liege lord spared him a look, briefly placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Your battle today has been fought and won. Now I will end this.'

With a storm-roar, the Angel vaulted into the sky, drawing his great crimson sword as he rose. Polluted clouds broke, scattering away from him as if in fear, and the primarch became a streak of golden fire, falling toward the temple of bones like a blazing comet.

A single feather, pure and dazzling white, settled slowly to the deck at Kano's feet.

Since the war for Signus had begun, Captain Raldoron had seen much that had tested his reason, his stoic character, and for want of a better word, his *faith*. Yet it seemed that there would be no end to the obscenity of betrayal that patterned every assault the Blood Angels had suffered. Lies and hidden truths, creatures out of myth and fable, all these things were hard to take – but none so difficult as the risible horror of treachery.

Raldoron discharged his bolter into the screeching face of a bloodletter, beheading it with the gun's back-blast. The crimson-skinned body stumbled about, sword still swinging wildly. He finished it with a hard kick that sent the daemon-form stumbling back over the lip of the glowing pit and down toward the eldritch fires writhing below. Warp-flame licked hungrily at the walls of the broad flue, emerging from some non-space pierced by the psychic pain of millions of victims.

As the battle raged about the chamber, his warriors continuing to engage Ka'Bandha and the other monstrous fiends, the captain's gaze slipped for a heartbeat. It dropped toward the alien light of the pit. The illumination leaking from it soured everything. It was as if the Cathedral of the Mark had been built atop a wound in the flesh of reality.

The distraction almost took his life. A curved scimitar flashed at the edge of his vision and he spun, narrowly avoiding a cut that would have opened him wide.

Harox. The taciturn Word Bearer had come to make a trophy of the Blood Angel.

'Why have you done this?' Raldoron snapped, the question escaping him. 'Why did you turn?'

'You will never know, nor would you ever understand,' Harox grunted, feinting, striking back with his sword.

'Damn you, then!' The curse exploded from Raldoron's lips in a violent shout, and he felt his control slip away. The captain's bolter barked twice, the rounds slamming into Harox at close range. Divots of armour blasted free and the Word Bearer stumbled. 'Damn you!' Raldoron's fury took him and he clubbed Harox down to the floor of skulls with the smoking barrel of the gun, batting his sword from his grip with mad ferocity.

His armoured fist opened and without conscious thought, Raldoron tore across Harox's neck, ripping it open. The Word Bearer's blood jetted out in a cascade of crimson, splashing across his attacker. Before Harox could scramble free, Raldoron finished him, caving in his opponent's skull with his armoured boot.

He rocked back, shocked at the abrupt pulse of aggression that had moved through him. Tainted blood covered his armour, smoking into vapour.

Kyriss watched it all, and threw him a mocking bow, cackling at the scene. Immediately, the anger returned and Raldoron took a step toward the serpentine daemon, his thoughts filling with the desire

to tear it open and see the colour of its blood, just as he had with Harox.

He halted, pushing back against the impulse, refusing to let it take control. Raldoron instinctively glanced up and saw the roiling crimson aura bathing him, the hideous glow of the captured rage in the crystal capsule. The malevolent influence of the daemonic device was growing stronger with every passing second. It had to be destroyed.

The captain sprinted for the edge of the chamber, toward a ladder made of limb bones that rose toward a ribcage gantry ringing the walls. If he could get close, find an angle to take a shot…

'Where are you going, insect?' Hot, cloying breath washed over him with a foul stink like rotting flowers, and suddenly Kyriss was there in front of him, the creature's sinuous legs and multiple arms twitching. The beast skipped toward him, blocking his path. 'So transparent,' it lowed, sniggering. 'Do you not yet understand? You cannot win! You can only give yourself to the ragefire.' Kyriss nodded toward Harox's corpse and burst out laughing, spiteful and loud. 'You already have!'

The fury rose again and Raldoron let it propel him forward. He coiled his muscles and sprang at the daemon – but not in attack, as it expected. Instead, he dodged right, twisting to slip past beneath its guard toward the ladder.

The captain's boots cracked across the crowns of broken skulls, but then the world became a wall of pain and his ruse was blunted. Kyriss pirouetted like a dancer and one of the black claws on its secondary arms raked across his chest and shoulder, shredding ceramite and ripping away his pauldron. The talon closed, and Raldoron felt his innards being crushed as his armour was compacted.

'Khorne-child!' Kyriss called out to its daemonic companion. 'Deal with this.'

The bat-winged goliath across the chamber knocked away a pair of warriors firing on it and turned. Kyriss discarded Raldoron like a distasteful piece of meat and he spun from its killing grip, tumbling across the mottled floor to halt beneath the sickly illumination of the vast cathedral window.

Ka'Bandha stalked closer as Raldoron struggled to his knees, grasping for the handle of his sword. The captain saw the wicked smile on the monster's lips, saw the rise of its massive, rough-hewn axe. 'The blood of the weak will oil the blades of the strong.' The words bubbled deep in its throat.

The axe-head rose for the killing blow, just as a shadow passed across the maimed suns in the sky outside. A shadow in grace and swiftness, moving with unstoppable purpose.

The beast Ka'Bandha hesitated.

Glassy matter and bone frames exploded into millions of fragments, the circular mandala-window destroyed by the force of the Angel's arrival.

Sanguinius landed with a thunderous roar at his back, his wings rising in shimmering arches of white, the shine of his battle armour as dazzling as the light of daybreak. A pure force of will radiated from him, magnificent and unending. The primarch was at that moment the very antithesis of the shroud of hate and horror that had taken root on Signus Prime; it was as if the universe itself had decided to express its disgust at these daemon-things through his martial fury. Sanguinius rose like a golden storm, vengeance incarnate, the righteous power of a brother betrayed and a father wronged crackling at his fingertips.

Lightning-swift, he surged forwards, the length of his crimson-bladed great sword lifting to cut the ashen dust. He did not turn to lay his gaze upon the goat-headed Kyriss, not even for an instant, yet Sanguinius's sword left his hand with a flick of his forearm and it sang as it sliced through the air

toward the pink-skinned daemon.

The tip of the blade pierced Kyriss's muscular gut with such force that ran it through, slamming the beast back into the walls of the bone temple. The creature released a high-pitched, ululating scream as it struggled in place, pinned there by the full length of the sword, like an insect of curious nature captured for study.

This was done, on fleet foot, in the blink of an eye. The Bloodthirster was already turning towards the Angel, its execution of Captain Raldoron forgotten in the face of this new attack. Axe and lash flexed in brawny, clawed hands as it squared up to meet him.

Sanguinius crossed the yellowed tessellate of the chamber floor, the cheers of his noble sons echoing. Bloodletters baying for murder rushed to meet him, hellblades red as hate rebounding off his armour. The primarch gave them little heed, smashing them aside or crushing them into the ground with heavy swinging blows from his mailed fists.

Ka'Bandha spat and threw the arc of his whip out in a downward stroke. Sanguinius did not falter in his approach, his left wing snapping forward to cloak his face, meeting the barbed tip of the lash, blood jetting where the hooks bit deep. He hissed in pain but shrugged off the assault, closing to point-blank distance, reaching for his foe. The daemon was ready for him and the Bloodthirster's other arm fell with the axe set to cleave the Angel's skull in two. Sanguinius's hands came together in a strident crash of sound, catching the blade between them.

For a brief moment, the two titans struggled against each other, eyes locked, muscles bunching.

'You came back,' grated the daemon.

'My sons found me.'

'That changes nothing, little angel.' The axe trembled, shifting back and forth. One mistake and the blade would fall.

Across the chamber, the impaled Kyriss bellowed over the sound of the Angel's legionaries in battle with its foot soldiers. 'Kill him!'

Ka'Bandha's tongue flicked. 'Your precious Legion will be destroyed, Sanguinius. You cannot stop it. Even now your chosen are caught in the depths of a killing rage they cannot escape. It is too late! The poison is in them. You know that as well as I.'

'Perhaps,' hissed Sanguinius. 'But they will not fall today. I will not permit it.' He bared his fangs in a snarl. 'This ends now… *daemon*.'

With a wordless shout, the Angel twisted his arms, his hands tearing at the strange, grisly material of the axe-head. A sickening crack broke about the room like the snapping of a spine, and Ka'Bandha's weapon shattered across its length, scattering pieces of shrapnel. Before the creature could react, Sanguinius grasped one of the Bloodthirster's curved horns and jerked it forwards with all his might. The primarch brought up his fist to meet the beast's snout and landed a flurry of quick blows from the knuckles of his gauntlet before Ka'Bandha shoved him away.

Spitting out gobs of black, fuming blood and broken teeth, the daemon growled. 'Look at you. Where is the noble angel now, abhuman? Better the sweet blood to smother you!' Ka'Bandha's arm swung back, the brass cords of its whip scraping across the bone floor, flicking up into the air for another lethal blow as powerful as the one that had struck down the Angel upon the Plains of the Damned.

Sanguinius reacted faster than the eye could follow. He flashed into the air, wings crackling, and caught the razored tips of the whip before they could reach him. The cords burned where they touched

the ceramite, pennants of vapour issuing from between his armoured fingers. The primarch dove at the Bloodthirster, dragging the lash with down him, and before the creature could react, he pulled the whip into a loop across the howling monster's throat.

Angel and daemon collided, crashing to the floor. Ka'Bandha released its grip on the lash, but it was too late; the brass cables pulled tight. Sanguinius gave the whip a violent tug and the Bloodthirster's howls became strangled, frenzied barks.

The beast tried to break free, swatting at the primarch, grasping at air. Its bat-like wings unfurled, the talons at their tips, scratching gouges in Sanguinius's armour.

With cold and lethal precision, the primarch arrested the wild, beating motion of one of the freakish wings with his free hand. 'Only angels may fly,' he said darkly, tearing out the black pinion.

The sound was like the splitting of a great sack-cloth sail, and the daemon Ka'Bandha screamed loud enough to shake the walls. Warpfire gushed from the stump of the wing and it shuddered in agony, a sensation it had only known previously from the cries of its enemies.

With the whip still coiled about its neck, the Angel dragged the spitting, wounded fiend to the lip of the pit in the middle of the chamber, then lifted it up so he could look it in the face. The daemon cackled through its pain, convulsing as it tried to shake free. 'I will take your skull yet.'

The primarch's eyes flashed with a powerful hatred. 'If you truly do hail from the realm that men once called hell,' he intoned, 'when you return there, tell your kindred it was Sanguinius who threw you back.' With a grunt of effort, the Angel took hold of the beast and shoved it over the spiked edge.

Ka'Bandha's curses echoed all the way down, before it finally vanished, shrieking, into the warp-flames.

Meros's spirit soared as the primarch dispatched the winged daemon, and for an instant he dared to hope that they might yet still find a shade of victory in this bloody clash of attrition. He beat his fist off his armour to echo his master's triumph, even as the Apothecary knew that the battle was far from ended.

About him swirled a nightmare of screaming, bestial forms that threw themselves against the guns and swords of the Blood Angels. Orexis was at Raldoron's side, hoisting the captain to his feet, firing with his off-hand. He glimpsed Cassiel, Leyteo, the Techmarine Kaide and a handful of other legionaries held off from Kyriss by a rampaging pack of bloodletters.

Meros turned to reach for the woman Niobe, where she cowered in the shadow of a bone pillar. 'Tillyan! Come with me! We need you!'

She shook her head violently. 'I can't. *I can't*!'

He grimaced. Niobe's eyes were filled with fear. Nothing she had experienced could have prepared her for the horrors that were unfolding about her, or the path that had brought her here. It was a miracle that her spirit had not broken under the strain.

But Niobe's life, just like his, or any of the Legion's number, counted only in how they could be turned to the defeat of their enemies. He reached for her, and from nowhere a bolt shell creased his thigh, the impact blasting him from his feet.

The concussion was a hard fist of pressure that slammed Meros aside and into the fractured bone flooring. He rose quickly, shaking it off, and glimpsed Niobe lying in a heap; for a heart-stopping second he feared the bolt had struck the pariah, but there would have been little left of her if that had been so. The woman was bleeding and insensible. The edge of the blast that had put Meros down had

knocked her unconscious, and even as he realised it, the legionary felt the strange null-aura around her retreating, dissipating.

Meros feared Niobe might still perish. She was frail compared to a Space Marine, easily the casualty of internal injuries – but he could not spare a moment to attend to her.

Another shot tore into him.

Agony flared in Meros's leg from torn flesh and splintered bone, sparks jetted from his damaged armour. The fibre-bundle muscle array beneath the ceramite of his cuissart misfired, making him stagger. He felt for his chainaxe but the weapon was not there. Too late, he realised it had been torn from its mag-lock when he fell.

He saw the bastard Acolyte Tanus Kreed coming at him, firing again and aiming low. Meros dodged, attempting to draw him away. If Niobe was killed, whatever vague power shielded the strike team from the malignant energy of the ragefire would be lost, and so would they. Even now, Meros felt the tide of anger building in him. It felt horribly *true*. This blood thirst was not something created from without and forced upon the Blood Angels. It was a thread of the poison lying dark and dormant within them all, waiting to be dragged to the surface.

'You are lost, Blood Angel,' said Kreed. 'Never to know the glory. Your eyes forever blind!' The Word Bearer ran him down before he could draw his pistol, and the Acolyte bludgeoned Meros with the heavy mass of his boltgun. He stumbled again as Kreed fired point-blank, the shout of the rounds ringing in his ears.

The heavy barrel of the bolter, still searing hot from its discharge, struck the Apothecary in the face, his flesh sizzling. He lost his balance and went down.

'Change is coming, but you won't live to see it.' Meros blinked; Kreed's voice was close and resonant, rising on a symphony of gunfire and screams. 'Only those who embrace the truth will march with us.'

'You…' Meros managed, coughing out a lungful of smoke. The pain was intense. 'You are weak. Like Lorgar. The Word Bearers have always… been weak. Never with the strength to stand alone. You've always needed an *excuse*.'

'You know nothing,' growled Kreed, raising the bolter to aim it squarely at Meros's face. He could see tiny lines of prayer text acid-etched into the metal of the barrel.

'You always had to find a power to hide behind. A false god to justify your frailty of spirit! First it was the Emperor… and now these warp-freaks.'

Kreed leaned close, savouring the moment. 'Our gods love us.'

'Then go to them!' Meros lunged, bringing up his medicae gauntlet with all the strength he could manage, twisting away from the bolter muzzle. The weapon discharged, deafening him, but the shot went wide. Meros did not miss; with a flex of his fingers, the gauntlet mechanism extended a serrated bone-cutter and he forced it up through the underside of Kreed's jaw, ramming the keen edge up into his nasal cavity and skull. He pulled back and ripped the blade away, splitting open the Acolyte's face in a splatter of gore. The Word Bearer died with a hissing gargle and the Blood Angel skidded free of his kill.

He recovered his chainaxe and went to Niobe, scowling with each weighty step he placed on his wounded leg. Gathering up the woman over his shoulder as if she were no more than a roll of cloth, he left Kreed's corpse behind and approached his battle-brothers.

From elsewhere, in the halls of the Cathedral of the Mark, came the echo of clashing blades and

hatred unleashed.

NINETEEN

Sacrifice
Drink Deep of Victory
Remember the Fallen

At the halls of Signus Prime's profane basilica, the massed might of the Blood Angels Legion had gathered in their numbers, drawn from all across the battlefield to press the daemonic enemy back into their lair. Dead cultists and the deformed bodies that were the flesh-cloaks of the spirits from the warp carpeted the bone floor and the great ruined plaza outside. Slicks of fluid painted the ground or pooled in shallow lakes. Elsewhere, the spent blood of the culled beasts was spattered in arcs across the walls where throats had been opened. The scene was repeated all across the planet, in every stronghold of the enemy and upon the ships that even now still duelled in the dark of high orbit.

The sons of Sanguinius had lost themselves in the riot of killing. Careful, drilled lines of company and Chapter had become broken and mixed, and from hour to hour, the Legion had slowly transformed into something wild. They had become a red hurricane that tore across Signus Prime leaving nothing in its wake. The Blood Angels fought as they had never fought before, not with cool reason and righteous might as their guides, but with hearts beating for vengeance, a berserker's blood-thirst on their lips. Unstoppable, all that stood in their path was obliterated.

The foe had gravely miscalculated the will of the angels. Far from being broken by the vicious, brutal attack upon their beloved Sanguinius, they had been cut loose by it. The bonds that held them in check were slipped, and a darkness previously hidden had been unleashed. Each of them bayed for the blood of their enemy, but it was a thirst that could not be slaked – only given respite for a brief interval.

The last of the daemon guard were backed into the wide, echoing annex at the base of the Cathedral of the Mark, pressed into a mass of writhing, unspeakable flesh. The horde had lived high in their rule of the Signus Cluster, tormenting and killing the common human colonists that had called these worlds home. The last of them had been butchered by the daemons in this spot, and so it was a fitting place for the killers to be killed.

The Blood Angels cut them down, their numbers thinning as the blades rose and fell. Bodies were ripped apart in spurting tides of gore, daemonic essences shrieking as they evacuated the dying meat to fall into the great pit in the temple's bowels. The last of the soldier-creatures was massacred under a whirlwind of swords, but when it was done the rage did not abate.

A sullen, brooding silence descended, broken by the dripping of blood and the low grind of breather grilles. Only the mewling beast Kyriss now remained alive, up above in the great chamber of pain, but here upon the battlefield there was nothing left to kill.

Every enemy lay dead, but the blood-thirst still burned, seeking new hatred to fuel its unending hunger. Without words, hundreds upon hundreds of warriors raised their heads to look upon the faces

of the legionaries around them, to see not their battle-brothers, but rivals and the sources of old, petty enmities. Knuckles whitened around the grips of swords, fingers strayed toward triggers.

In the stillness, the future of a Legion balanced upon a blade's edge.

The daemon was weeping and laughing in equal measure as it placed its slender fingers about the hilt of the Angel's sword, agonisingly forcing it out of the gaping cavity in its torso. Ropes of stinking matter followed it in a gush as the blade crunched out of the wall and finally fell free, clattering to the bony floor.

Raldoron steadied himself, bringing up his gun. 'I want to be the one to kill it,' he spat, furious beyond measure. His wounds seemed vague, forgettable things. All he wanted was to slay the thing called Kyriss, to hear it screaming.

The captain blinked and tried to shake the sinister impulse away, but it only retreated to the edges of his thoughts, colouring everything around it.

The pink-skinned monstrosity spread its four arms and rolled its bovine head. 'Destroy this flesh and I will find more. That won't end the madness.' It stuttered as Sanguinius crossed the chamber toward it, golden light radiating from him. The Angel's face was set with wintry fury, a baleful glitter in his eyes.

Here was an aspect Raldoron had never seen of his master until this moment. There was pain in him, an intense hurt that could have stemmed from the wounds he had taken from the Bloodthirster's crippling lash. And more than that; Raldoron looked upon Sanguinius and saw a wound in his spirit, so deep it might never be healed.

But this was buried beneath a towering vehemence of such scale that only a gene-forged warlord could contain it. Sanguinius crouched and took up his crimson sword from where it had fallen, and the blade came alive with heat and colour, as if it had been drawn fresh from a blacksmith's forge.

'You are defeated, creature,' he rumbled. 'This war of horrors is over.'

All around, the survivors of Cassiel's and Orexis's squads had their guns trained on the beast, holding it in check. Raldoron saw Meros at the far edge of the group, gently placing the woman Niobe on the floor. His chainaxe twitched in his hand. All of them were feeling the same fraying of their tempers.

Kyriss cackled, clutching at the ragged wound in its gut. 'You know that is not so!' It pointed at the Angel's face. 'You have *sight*. You see into the changing of ways and the ways see into you. This present is your past vision. You dreamed it!' It threw back its head and hooted, black blood foaming at its lips. 'Today is the day your flaw emerges, Sanguinius of Baal. All your sons will see it. Some will not live to tell the tale!'

'No!' the Angel brought up the sword for a killing blow.

'Yes!' Kyriss threw up its hands, staggering backwards. It jabbed its claws at the smouldering crystal capsule above, rocking back and forth on its thick hawsers. 'The ragefire is lit, and it burns now, ceaseless.' The daemon leered at the Angel. 'It is the manifestation of the darkness inside you, abhuman. The same threads of red and black that spin through the molecules of your flesh and blood. The flaw dormant in your sons…' It cocked its head, toying with the words. 'The flaw that you have carried since your birth, Sanguinius.'

'What lies are these?' spat Kaide. 'My lord, destroy it and be done!'

'They are not lies,' said the primarch, the pain rising in his eyes once more. He glanced at

Raldoron, sharing the brief anguish with him. The captain remembered a warrior in the ruins of a sunken church on Melchior, and the handful of others before that.

'We know you, Angel,' Kyriss said, stifling a cough. 'We always have. Did you never wonder, in the long darkness of the night, when you were alone and troubled? Did you ever dare to voice thought about the origins of…' It trailed off, pausing to make a shape in the air, tracing the lines of Sanguinius's wings. '…your *gifts*?' The low, brassy cackle sounded once more. 'When you were cast from your errant father's arms to settle in the dust and the rad-lands of Baal, the Ruinous Powers watched you. They laid hands upon you.'

'*Now* you lie,' said Sanguinius. 'I am my father's son, and always will be. I am the angel of his pure wrath.'

'Then kill me and watch your sons fall to that power.' Kyriss rose up, drawing itself to its full height, ignoring the suppurating wounds across its ruined torso. '*Wrath*. It is what you are, it is what you hide beneath your noble mask. But if you do not embrace that flaw, if you continue to deny it… then the cost will be the lives of all your sons!' The daemon spun about, forcing the legionaries to drop back, out of range of its claws. 'That thug Ka'Bandha's artless game is over, and I will salvage some morsel of victory from this debacle. Submit to me!'

'Never.'

Kyriss roared in annoyance. 'I give you a choice, primarch. The ragefire cannot be doused, only *experienced*. It is self-sustaining. Look upon your sons. Even these warriors of great renown chafe at the bit and long to be released to the berserker's craving! If not for that ghost-mind witch they brought with them, it would have happened already. The rest of your Legion are but a breath away from turning upon one another!' Its claws clacked angrily. 'And this red thirst is only the beginning. It will become more powerful than anything you have yet dreamed.'

'What… choice?'

When Sanguinius said the words, Raldoron felt as if a blade had pierced his hearts. 'My lord, no–'

'*What choice, daemon*?' thundered the primarch.

'Take the ragefire into yourself,' said Kyriss. 'Accept it. Come with me, walk with your beloved brother Horus. Do this and your sons will be released. I make this promise. Your Legion will be spared, Angel. They will never know the flaw again. It will be your life for theirs.'

Raldoron saw the question unfolding in his master's eyes. Ever since the captain had learned of the legacy of the lost, of the threat that hid in the genetic matrix of the Legion, he had kept it silent as his liege lord had asked; but he could not close his eyes to how this know-ledge brought pain to his primarch. There was no fate the Angel feared but the suffering of his sons.

The tip of the great crimson sword wavered, and dipped toward the floor. Raldoron heard a chorus of shouts from the warriors at his side, cries of disbelief and censure. The First Captain struggled to his master's side, shaking his head. 'This is what the traitors want,' he insisted. 'This is why they brought us here, my lord! To bring us to this, don't you see?'

'I see,' said Sanguinius, and the words seemed to age him centuries.

'Is it so much to ask?' the daemon simpered. 'A father giving everything for his children. That is what you intended all along, isn't it, Sanguinius? To die for them?' Kyriss's hands crossed to perform a complicated string of gestures, and in return the crystal capsule above rattled and unfastened, plates of psychically-resonant material opening like a baroque mechanical flower. The red smoke within breathed into the air, billowing.

Raldoron tasted the haze on his tongue. It was bloody like wet iron and rich like bitter hate. 'You cannot trust this *thing*,' he spat.

'We will never lie to you,' said Kyriss, echoing Ka'Bandha's words on the Plains of the Damned. 'We will give you what you need. What you desire.'

The Angel cast a long, sombre look out through the ruined frame of the shattered window, down toward the masses of crimson-armoured warriors surrounding the cathedral. *His beloved sons*.

'If there must be sacrifice,' said Sanguinius, his wings slowly unfurling, 'then it will be made.'

'*It will be made*!' The shout sounded in echo of the primarch's words, and Raldoron spun toward the voice, hearing the abrupt drone of a chainblade weapon. '*But not by you*!'

He saw Meros, brandishing his axe high in one hand. The Apothecary snatched at one of the broad fibre-bound cables where it was bound to a ring of bone fused into the far wall, coiling his arm about the thick rope's circumference. Before anyone could stop him, Meros brought his chainaxe down on the rope and severed it in one buzzing cut. Released and free, the ragged cable's tension recoiled and it reeled up toward the complex web of massive pulleys and weights suspending the crystal construct. The Apothecary held on tightly, and let himself be hoisted up with it, into the cloying mist spilling from the open capsule. Meros's axe was wrenched from his grip and it tumbled away as he disappeared into the blood-shaded smoke.

Without hesitation, Sanguinius threw himself into the air in a flash of white and gold, soaring upwards in a spiral after his errant son.

He committed the act without uncertainty. He knew it was right. If there had been time to doubt, Meros might have wondered after such abstracts as fate or destiny, but he was not one to think in those terms. There was only the question of what needed to be done, of the immediacy of the action.

He cannot fall.

Ever since the moment he had been shot on Nartaba Octus, when he felt the soulseeker round penetrate his gut and lodge in his flesh, Meros had known that a ghost of his own ending was close at hand. He had been ready to die; that was the lot of a legionary, to always be ready to perish in glory and battle, for the Imperial Truth.

But death had not claimed him that day, and in the sarcophagus where he lay as his blood was cleansed of alien taint, whatever intangible quality of man that could be called his spirit wavered close to the edge of life.

Warmaster Horus.

The warrior he met on the dreamscape of the healing blood-sleep had said that name. A warning. Only now did Meros fully understand. At first, he thought that it was a caution, come too late, but in this moment it seemed otherwise. Was it, instead, that he had been prepared for this event? A Blood Angel who should have already been dead, held back from his end for this choice? This act?

It seemed right. It *was* right.

The shrieking cable burned as it rattled through the pulley mechanisms, hauling the heavy mass of his body and warplate upward, a dense counterweight dropping down toward the floor in return. Meros's vision clouded as he plunged upwards into the crimson haze and he let go, spinning free. Velocity shoved him aside and the Apothecary fell hard upon one petal of the open psi-capsule, cracking the crystal matrix. He scrambled, ceramite-sheathed fingers scraping across the slick surface, and rolled. Meros caught himself before he could lose his grip and tumble back the way he

had come. He rose and got his bearings.

The capsule, which from beneath had resembled a great box of misty crystal and brass filigree, was now open and lit with flares of energy. The colour of the bursts struck him in synesthetic jolts of emotion; the shade of hate, the tone of frenzy, the hue of anger.

The opened container should have ended, but within its structure there seemed no dimension, no form that was real. The inner space of it extended away into infinity, like a mirror looking into a mirror.

Red smoke moved around him as blood moved through clear water, in billowing, aggressive surges. It had intent and malice in its motion. Meros was reminded of the manner of a stalking carnodon, circling its prey.

He opened his arms. 'Come, then. Before I realise the fool that I am, come. Take your sacrifice.'

A heavy rush of air and the rumble of beating wings sounded a new arrival. Meros turned and suddenly there was the stern face of the Angel, alighting behind him. 'Stand down, my son,' he said. 'I command you.'

Meros took a breath, and then he spoke the most difficult words he had ever uttered. 'No, my lord. I must respectfully refuse.'

Sanguinius's eyes narrowed. 'You disobey your primarch.'

'Aye.' From nowhere, a strange mutter of sentiment rose through the Apothecary and he gave a rueful laugh. 'I suppose that makes me a *traitor*.'

'Meros. You cannot do this.' The Angel's wings folded close and he pointed toward the writhing mist. 'No mortal soul can survive contact with such a force. If it is what the beast Kyriss said, it is the raw force of the warp. It is the crude power of all our rages. You will not be able to control it. It will destroy you.'

'Yes,' he said, taking a step closer. 'It will destroy *me*. Not *you*.' Meros raised his hand, turning the wrist where the medicae gauntlet rested across his armoured wrist. 'You have taught us many things, Lord Sanguinius. The nobility of our spirit. The warrior prowess of our hearts. Humility, in the face of a universe of grandeur and magnificence.' Meros nodded to himself. 'And duty. The great weight of duty.' He looked up, meeting the Angel's steady, questioning gaze. 'You are a primarch, Emperor's son and warlord, the most numinous and gallant of your kin. I am but a warrior, born of the dust of Baal and raised high to fight in a great cause. And I see no greater cause than this.'

'I will not have my sons die in my stead,' whispered Sanguinius.

'That choice is not yours to make. It is ours. It is mine.' Carefully, Meros extended the gauntlet's cutting saw and placed it against his neck seal. 'If a single legionary is consumed in fire and fury, the galaxy will spin on, unheeding. But if you fall…' He grimaced. 'If the Warmaster has turned his face from Terra, then *you cannot fall*. Only you can meet him on equal footing. When the battle comes, you must be there to face him, brother against brother.' Meros hesitated. 'I do not have your sight, master, but I see that. And I know.'

With a gush of sparks and a growl of pain, Meros forced the cutter down the front of his armour, opening a jagged tear through the ceramite that ran from throat to groin, down through the layers to the flesh beneath. He guided the barbed tip of the reductor to the correct places, as he had so many times before upon the bodies of legionaries about to die. The device whirred and bored through skin, raising a rasp of pain. Meros flexed the digital controls and, with wet pops of spilled blood, he removed his own progenoid glands. The device sucked the nodules of gene-rich tissue into a

reservoir pod, sealing them inside for preservation. Meros's bequest to his Legion now lay secured.

Crimson spotting his lips, the Apothecary twisted the medicae module and it detached from his armour. 'My lord, if you will?' Reeling from the shock, Meros tossed it towards the Angel, who snatched it out of the air with a flash of gold. 'Take this… and let something of me live on.'

Then he turned his back on his master and threw himself into the churning heart of the ragefire.

It was more terrible than words could describe. It was rage in its purest form, an utter vacuum of all other sense and emotion. There was no love to temper it, no peace to foster tranquillity. There was no control or reason by which the fury could be marshalled and commanded. No intellect to focus it, no morality and instinct through which it might find boundary.

There was only rage, burning red and livid, summoning a thirst for blood and blood and blood; and somewhere deep beneath, waiting to follow the crimson path, there was a night-black fury beyond even this. A madness, a frenzy of towering psychotic dimensions.

And all of this was within them.

The burning smoke poured into Meros as wine would fill a cup, in through the breach in his armour, entering him by his eyes and his ears, bleeding through the pores in his skin.

The last tiny vestiges of the legionary that had been Captain Tagas, battle-brother and lost soul, passed through him, gossamer-light and then were gone forever. Meros caught the dimmest fraction of Tagas's self. The warp had changed the captain, the psychic power of the capsule slowly denaturing his flesh until poor, tortured Tagas had disintegrated into this directionless energy. For so long they had kept him undying, held him on the edge of fury and madness, that it had literally consumed him. The daemons had trapped a warrior in a crucible of hatred until all that was left was the most base, most flawed part of his spirit. Flesh become energy. Self become emotion.

In this impossible alchemy, Kyriss and his sorcerers had made the ragefire from Tagas. They had turned one ordinary warrior soul of the Blood Angels into the key to destroy them all.

Meros would avenge him, if he could. He held on to that thought as the rage and the thirst overwhelmed him, slowly encroaching upon all that he was. The fire would consume him, overwrite his mind and character.

And it was here, at the end, as he willingly made the choice to sacrifice himself, that Meros felt the presence of another mind. Not Tagas, for he was long dispersed, and only his echo had remained. No, this was something *newborn*.

A consciousness of the warp aggregated and growing, becoming animate.

Some said that the crazed tides of the immaterium were a literal sea of emotion, the unreal reflection of the corporeal. If that were so, then this mind was born of that. A gathering of rage and thirst, of need and desire, so powerful that it now achieved sentience itself. By degrees, that presence swept in and drowned the mind of Brother Meros, filling him, changing him, becoming real. In a cataclysmic detonation of red, the crystal capsule exploded into a burning rain of glittering dust.

Kano felt his friend's ending, and he stumbled, the shock shoving at him like a physical blow. He staggered and fell against a broken stanchion, blinking away the sympathetic pain, his head rising. Kano stared out through a jagged slash in the *Red Tear*'s hull, out over the wastelands of the warzone toward the high towers of the daemonic temple. Lightning in spears of emerald and crimson flashed from turbid clouds swirling overhead, illuminating the ashen sky. The sparks of searing colour were

like the swords of warring deities, chasing each other back and forth.

The greasy, electric tang of raw psychic energy was in the air, the careless toxic overspill of the warp's denizens liberated in their death-throes, polluting the world from their point of entry into this universe. Through all that, Kano felt Meros being taken away. It wasn't a death; that was a regrettably commonplace effect, felt many times over in the service of the Great Crusade. Meros's end was more a slow erasure of his self from the surface of reality. Kano's psychically-attuned mind saw it happening, though his physical self was many kilometres removed from the Cathedral of the Mark.

What he saw without seeing was the retreat of an invisible tide of furious hatred and blood-charged frenzy. All upon the surface of Signus Prime and within the span of its orbit had bathed in a ghostly radiation of anger, a spectral texture of it that spoke directly to the heart of a Blood Angel. That cloak of gloom, like the great black veil that still shrouded the entire Signus Cluster, was made of the unmatter of thought, and its touch was poisonous. Soberly, Kano considered that it would have ended them all eventually, robbing even the best of them of restraint and reason.

But now this shadow-that-was-no-shadow drew back, falling away like the scales of wild fury from the eyes of his battle-brothers. As it passed, legionaries with guns raised and swords at the high found the snarls in their throat stilled. The flaw within them remained undimmed, its power still strong, but the control that had been stolen from the IX Legion was at last repaid to them. Their temper changed as the storm broke.

The ragefire of over a hundred thousand warriors collapsed in on itself, growing heavier, becoming solid and distinct. Like an unborn star condensing from stellar gas and dust, the fury accreted within the soul of Kano's battle-brother. It brought a gasp of pure sorrow to his lips as he understood the supremacy of the sacrifice the Apothecary had made.

Meros was a warrior of good character, but he had never been what others would have called a champion, a hero of the Legion. He was simply what the rank and file of the Blood Angels had always been: loyal, noble sons of Terra and Baal, selfless and ready to fight. Ready to die.

Kano closed his eyes but he could not shut out the vision. The telepathic surge was too great, dragging his inner sight to it with the sheer gravity of its effect. In his hearts, a cold and slow certainty began to form, and Kano steeled himself. *This felt familiar*. He had seen it before.

He remembered *the deck beneath his boots breaking apart like brittle ice and falling through into a bottomless void of black*.

'No.' The denial left his mouth in a whisper. The word was a weak, fragile thing, it was sudden understanding; it was memory and regret. It was truth.

He remembered *a human figure coming up out of the darkness, straight towards him, screaming. A warrior in heavy armour that glistened with wet crimson and hellish red radiance.*

Ranged in the endless mental chasm of the psychic realm, Kano knew now what the vision he had experienced back in the meditation cell had revealed. *The eyes were known to him*. In a way, he had *always* known who it was. Everything had been moving, turning as worlds turned about suns, event upon event, all to bring this moment to pass.

Meros transformed, writhing in the grip of an infernal glow as the burning power merged with every atom of his being. The flesh of his face distorted into a hollow mask far beyond the guise of pain. His armour became dark and disfigured, joints steaming, the shell of it trembling as it fought to contain energies never meant to be bound to this reality. In the warp's shadow, Kano saw a pair of ghostly, blood-drenched wings briefly unfold from the wounded Apothecary's back, anointing the

ruined bones beneath with a rain of phantasmal blood; then they were gone.

Brother Meros ended, and the Red Angel began.

The crystal matrix of the capsule rang like dissonant bells as it came apart, brass and crystal shards becoming lethal shrapnel. The beast Kyriss bolted forward, arms raised in what could have been supplication, screaming in tongues. The strident, inhuman noise was deafening; it was the sound of an emotion dying, a deceit so stygian and ghastly that even the blackest of human hearts would not have been able to encompass it.

The daemon howled, it wept like a bereft widow, it hammered in great tantrums at everything around it. Finally it turned and spat bile towards the ragged line of Blood Angels who moved to keep the creature in their sights. 'You had no right to do this! You mewling, ignorant animals! How dare you ruin it all? You are our pawns! This is Signus Daemonicus, our beachhead, our war-ground! And here you do as we bid!' Kyriss's melodic voice crackled and broke, becoming hard-edged and spiteful. As it changed, so did the daemon's tattoo-patterned face, the bland pinkness of its bovine snout gathering newer, more malignant shades. 'The pieces upon the board have no right to rebel! You take what we give, you adore it–'

A winged shadow broke the words of the beast as white pinions cut the smouldering haze above, and the red-shaded iron of a heavy warlord's blade flashed. Kyriss fell back and squealed, the tone ringing up and down a cascade of chords, a whickering atonal siren-song that blasted the Blood Angels back with the force of a graviton cannon. The claw-hands of its borrowed flesh came up, snapping and raking at the ground, and it drew a weapon cut from seamless, shimmering silver, as if out of thin air.

Raldoron, Cassiel and the others needed no orders to press forth the final attack, knowing as much as their enemy did that it was the last daemon standing. Bolter shells lashed at the fiend, chopping twisted divots of meat from its warped body.

Kyriss spun in a mad, dizzying pirouette, trying to kill whatever it could. Thick, rheumy tears oozed down its face, spittle foamed over lips and across its shivering breasts. 'You must love us!' it bellowed. 'We give you blood and hate and you will *love us for it!*'

The Angel was there for the killing blow, looming large behind the creature. He stood magnificent and terrible in his sun-bright armour, his great sword held in a reversed executioner's grip. 'I will take your silence now,' he said, and crossing his hand over his chest, Sanguinius put the red blade through the daemon's throat from shoulder to shoulder.

Kyriss's voice ceased. With a cascade of polluted blood jetting from the killing wound, its body tumbled forwards, freed from its head. The primarch snatched at a curved horn before the cut could separate both parts and let the corpse drop. He slowly turned the severed head to study it with dispassion, examining the trophy he had made of the thing from the warp.

It whispered words that only Sanguinius was close enough to hear. Then he smiled, the instant so brief it was barely there.

Raldoron ignored the pain of his wounds and limped towards his master, lowering the muzzle of his bolter. He watched the primarch discard the daemon's head with a cursory flick of his wrist, sending it over the lip of the great pit. Noxious fumes that sickened even the hard constitution of a legionary were already curling from the corpse of the dead fiend.

Quickly, like an accelerated pict-feed, the headless body of the thing that had called itself Kyriss

the Perverse decayed, melting away into a ugly slurry that resembled some flyblown trough of offal. Flesh became gluey liquid, oozing into cracks of the floor, and misshapen bones became visible before these too blackened and denatured like old, yellowed wax. The First Captain had a killer's knowledge of anatomy and organic structure, but nothing of the creature's remains followed any logic of biology he could recall. For a disturbing moment, he thought he saw the outlines of a man's skeleton, somehow trapped inside the bones of the daemon, as if one had grown out of the other; but then it became gritty powder, aged millennia in seconds. The last fragment to dissolve was the blackened nub of a heart organ.

Cassiel drew a line through a drift of the rotting matter with the tip of his sword. 'Is it over, then?' There was such weariness in his voice, one might have thought a century had passed in the prosecution of the Signus pacification. It was hard to accept that it had only been a span of days.

'Look,' said Kaide warily, the heavy servo-arm emerging from the Techmarine's backpack whirring as it turned to point toward a figure standing at the edge of the pit.

Raldoron looked and looked again. In fact, the figure did not stand. It floated, just a short span off the floor, drifting slightly. The same sickening light that he had seen boiling inside the psychic capsule, that he had felt pressing into his thoughts, was now concentrated in this one individual. A halo of hell-flames burned about him, rumbling low and hateful.

'Meros,' said Cassiel, making the name a memorial. 'By the throne, he lives.'

'That is not life, sergeant,' said Sanguinius, stepping forwards to place himself between his warriors and their transformed brother. 'He gave that up for us.'

Raldoron signalled to the other legionaries to be ready, and they took aim. 'Must we kill him, then?'

The Angel waited for the apparition to make the next move. 'Something different exists inside that body. Of the legionary we knew, only a fraction may remain.'

The thing that had been Brother Meros abruptly looked up, as if Sanguinius had called its name. 'A fraction remains,' it said, and there was the ghost of the Apothecary's manner in the words. 'Just enough so that he may be tormented by what he has done.'

It drifted slowly toward them and the legionaries held off an instant from opening fire. Sanguinius stood his ground, blade at rest, waiting.

'I am here now,' it went on. 'Within your fallen son. I know your dark heart. This one will not perish as the other did. Tagas's weakness was that he believed he had been abandoned. That is the key through which the Ruinous Powers destroyed his soul. This one…' It paused, examining its broken, armoured hands. 'He knows what he did for you.'

Raldoron was closest to his master's side, and so it was only he who glimpsed what might have been the shimmer of a tear upon the primarch's fire-seared cheek.

'Heed me, creature. Let Meros hear this.' Sanguinius raised the great sword and pointed with it, right at the transformed warrior's chest. 'Your gambit has failed. Whatever these powers are that you call master, whatever irrational choice my brother Horus has made to seek a pact with them, you stand defeated this day upon the cusp of victory. Do you understand the reason why?'

'This one.' The broken legionary traced the smouldering breach down the front of the shattered armour. 'An exemplar of your kind. You were underestimated. The thirst would have taken you–'

'But it did not.' Sanguinius's face hardened with defiance. 'Because as long as one single Blood Angel lives and breathes, he will be master of his spirit. He will not let the abyss that lies in the hearts of us all take him into darkness.' He looked away, fierce pride in his eyes as he surveyed

Raldoron and the rest of his battle-weary sons. ‘That is the truth you did not understand, the truth that Horus has forgotten. It is not the descent towards the shadow nor the rise toward the light that makes us superior. It is in the endless struggle between the two where greatness of character resides. We are tested, and we do not break.’ The Angel’s voice became a sudden shout. ‘*We will never fall!* Take that to my brother and tell him!’

The broken warrior turned, giving a doll-like nod, and drifted toward the great pit. The warp-fires within it grew loud and agitated, as if they sensed its approach.

To Raldoron’s surprise, Sanguinius took a few steps after the phantom. ‘Meros?’ he said, and his words were low so that they would not carry. ‘If you hear this, know my oath. I swear upon the Legion, whose honour you have upheld, that your noble sacrifice will be repaid. You will not end in silence.’

The fire-wreathed form did not acknowledge him. It stepped off the edge of the floor, and crimson wings of arcane lightning flashed from its back. Raldoron heard a throaty, bass rumble from beneath them that grew until it was as loud as the world breaking open.

An inferno of warp energies fumed with volcanic force, swallowing up the body of the transformed warrior. Sanguinius spun to put his back to it, spreading his wings wide to shield the bodies of his legionaries from the punishing wall of hellfire.

An instinct screamed in Raldoron’s thoughts – a sense buried deep in the core of his brain, something that stemmed back millions of years to the most basic element of the human psyche. He bellowed out a command to the legionaries. ‘Turn away! Do not look upon the fires, brothers! Turn away!’

Horrors untold and unfathomable in word or thought screamed and cursed the Blood Angels as their last foothold on Signus Prime was broken. The upper storeys of the temple’s thick conical tower were blown to pieces as a seething globe of raw warp-fire tore free of the surface of the planet. Broken fragments of bone scattered wide, tumbling from the sky in an obscene rain.

The warp-mass lost its grip on the material universe and was dragged shrieking through the sky, searing the ash clouds, breaking through the thin membrane of atmosphere and accelerating. It consumed great gulps of wreckage from the death belts in low orbit, and the surviving ships of the Blood Angels flotilla burned hard and fast to get out of its path, many of them becoming the battle’s last victims as their ships reacted too slowly to avoid obliteration.

The swirling sphere of immaterial witch-fire lost cohesion and, like a dying, drowning man striking out with mad violence as death encroached, it clawed at the planets and suns of the Signus Cluster, ripping at their surfaces and sucking in matter. But it could not hold. This time the psychic scream was suffocated and a brief supernova blossomed before the fire bled out into embers and at last, nothingness.

Slowly, tentatively, the veil of shadow that had engulfed the full span of the star system broke apart, dissipating like a storm before the wind.

There, up on the surface, standing in the ruins of the broken tower, Raldoron looked up into a sky where there were no clouds. Little by little, in the black above them, the stars that had been blinded returned their light to look down upon Signus Prime once again.

Cassiel was the first to speak. ‘Is it over *now*?’

Sanguinius spared him a look. He shook his head.

TWENTY

Price to Pay
Sorrow
Imperium Secundus

The ground trembled as the earthquake resonated across the desolate plains, and there was a moment when Signus Prime seemed to hold its breath. Then, on spars of nuclear fire that burned rock and sand to vapour, the gigantic hulk of the *Red Tear* began to rise. Slowly at first, sloughing off broken shards of metal and sheaves of falling sand deposited by the mournful winds, the battle-barge pulled free of the earth that held it. Fighting gravity every metre of the way, the ship seemed to defy reason as it lifted into the dull air. The monolithic, city-sized craft resisted the planet's attempts to hold it where it had fallen. This was the last battle that would be fought in the Signus Cluster, the final match between the might of the Blood Angels and the wastelands made from human misery and warp-sorcery. The IX Legion would win it as they had those before; to fail would be to dispute the will of the Angel.

On Signus Prime, on Holst, and in orbit, in every place where their warriors had set foot, their primarch had commanded that his sons excise all evidence that the Legion had ever come to this place. Over the days that passed after the final charge on the Cathedral of the Mark, an army of servitors and Wardens had gathered up every battle-brother's corpse, every broken vehicle, every torn piece of armour or blunted sword. The work was almost complete, but for the spent casings of a few bolt shells lying lost and buried in the sands, but little more. Sanguinius had ordered it so. The Blood Angels would leave nothing behind in this blighted, murdered place. Not their ships, not their relics and not their precious dead.

Wounded but still imperious, the *Red Tear* lifted faster and faster as its mighty engines pressed it into the sky. The warship's damage was great – deep within her internal spaces repairs were still underway – but like the Blood Angels, she had defied the odds and the plans of a deceitful enemy to ascend again. The white glow of the dwarf sun Signus Beta, high overhead through the pall of airborne dust, shone down and was briefly eclipsed by the *Red Tear*'s silhouette. The shadow it cast in mirror of the Legion's sigil passed over the battlefield, and away.

Raldoron watched the mighty barge recede into the ranges of the Signusi sky, he and all the other captains gathered in the tumbledown ruins gazing up in salute to see it go. They were the last Blood Angels on planet, anywhere in the system. A short distance away, a flight of Stormbirds were waiting to take them from this disfigured wilderness. Once they turned their back on Signus Prime, they would never return.

No one would return. It had already been etched into the Legion's book of hours, by the primarch's own hand. The Blood Angels would not build a monument or grave marker here, as they had on other planets where such bloodshed had occurred. The hundreds upon hundreds of the dead would be taken

home to Baal to be buried on the slopes of Mount Seraph, the injured ships to stardocks for repair and re-armament. Warning buoys and automated beacons were being deployed all about the star system's perimeter, there to turn back any ships that might come this way in the years ahead.

The Signus Cluster had been declared *Mortae Perpetua*; forever dead. It would be left lifeless and rotting until its suns burned cold, with nothing but the echoes of those who perished there to bear witness.

Raldoron turned away from the burned sky and the bloodstained desert, his gaze crossing the faces of his comrades. He saw Galan and Furio, Carminus and Azkaellon, each legionary outwardly at attention in their master's presence, but each under some aspect of the same brooding shadow that lay across the entire Legion. In the aftermath of the bloodbath at the cathedral, when the witchery of the ragefire had finally been broken, the character of the Blood Angels had turned to morose mien and the bitter sting of misery. Slowly, like men emerging into day from decades of life in a lightless dungeon, they had come to understand that this particular nightmare had passed. Some even affected brighter manner and hopeful mood, but the First Captain could not help but wonder how much of that was forced. It was only Amit whose conduct had grown darker. Even now, he lurked at the edges of the group, engaging no one, his eyes hooded and lost in his own thoughts.

Raldoron frowned. The Legion had been wounded in this place, a cut that had pressed to their very core. Like their primarch, the Blood Angels had been blindsided by those they called kin. The distant perfidy of Warmaster Horus and the closer lies of the Word Bearers had brought them to the brink of the abyss. *We have been shown the worst of ourselves*, he thought, *and it is a sobering truth to behold*.

Time would tell if they would heal this wound, or if it would fester within them for eternity. For now, the captain remembered Sanguinius's words in the bone temple. *We are tested, and we do not break.*

He stepped aside briefly to allow a servitor to grind past him, ambling towards the Stormbirds. The machine-slave was one of a handful that had accompanied the battle captains to this place. The sevitors bore the mechanisms for a tactical cyclonic device, which now sat in the middle of the ruins. A stubby bollard of plasteel, it contained a warhead of incredible destructive power. The weapon had been programmed to detonate when the assembled officers reached a safe distance; the resultant blast it would create would be enough to rip a massive chasm in Signus Prime's surface, and eradicate all trace of the Cathedral of the Mark forever.

Sanguinius considered the weapon, then turned to face them. 'Our enemy has made a grave error, my sons. He did not kill us all when the chance was open to him.' The Angel's expression was grim. 'And now we will exact the blood cost for that mistake. The cost, for the lives of your battle-brothers lost in this madness. For the innocents sacrificed to draw us here.' Fury glittered in his eyes. 'The cost of betrayal and treachery.'

The primarch glanced at Azkaellon, and the Guard Commander took his cue to offer up a nugget of information. 'Our ships have conducted a search for the *Dark Page*, but the traitor vessel has eluded us. We can only assume that the Word Bearers have fled the system and made space for the warp. I imagine they carry word of their failure back to...' He faltered suddenly, stumbling over the words.

'*Horus*,' intoned the Angel. 'You may say my wayward brother's name, Azkaellon. We will all be called to speak it, when the moment comes that he must be named arch-traitor.'

Raldoron knew that his master was in pain with every breath he was taking; although he gave no

sign of it, the crippling injury he had suffered on the battlefield still had to heal. A lesser being would never have walked again without sacrificing their broken limbs for augmetic replacements. Sanguinius mastered that pain, holding it where none could see it. But not so the other pain, the agony of his soul. That, he could not keep from the warriors of his inner circle, the legionaries who knew the Angel best. Raldoron saw it in his eyes, heard it in his words. The Warmaster had awakened at first a great sorrow in his angelic brother, but now that had burned down and been rebuilt as a great and powerful hatred.

The primarch's sword slid from its scabbard and Sanguinius placed his bare hand upon it, drawing blood. 'I swear that the day will dawn when I face Horus and put him to the question, and to the blade. There is no doubt in my mind that my brother has turned away from the rightful rule of the Emperor and the banner of Terra's glory. He has united with monsters to prosecute his rebellion. I do not know why, but that shall not stay our hands. It may be madness, the influence of the alien or the corrosion of his heart, but I will learn that truth when I meet him face to face.' He gripped the sword with fierce intensity. 'And then I will kill him for his treason.'

As a mutter of grave assent passed through the assembled group, Raldoron felt compelled to speak. 'My lord, if the Sons of Horus and the Word Bearers have united against the rest of the Imperium, then we face a battle like no other in human history.'

Sanguinius nodded. 'It is much worse than you think, my friend. This day, Azkaellon brought me news of a communication deciphered by one of our few surviving astropaths.'

Raldoron listened intently. While the arcane veil had been in place, no astropathic signals had been able to reach the Blood Angels flotilla. It seemed that while they had been locked in their peculiar prison, time had stuttered in a freakish pattern and events had moved on around them. This new war, it seemed, was not confined to the Signus Cluster or the Blood Angels.

The primarch announced that the message bore the seal of Rogal Dorn, the Imperial Fist himself. A cheer went up. Many feared that traps similar to the one that had ensnared the IX Legion had been sprung upon other steadfast sons of the Imperium, and word of Dorn's wellbeing was met with relief.

'Aye, it is well he lives,' said Sanguinius, his mood unchanged, foreboding. 'But his word came with greater import. Dorn marshals the defences of Terra, but warns of the rot of betrayal spread wide. The Emperor's Children, Word Bearers, Night Lords, Alpha Legion. The Iron Warriors, World Eaters and the Death Guard. All of them now march to the Warmaster's drums.'

A shocked silence fell. Raldoron heard the rumble of his blood in his veins, felt his breath catch in his throat. If any other but the primarch had said those words, he would have decried them on the spot. The First Captain saw his battle-brothers struggling to process this information. It was a dizzying, horrific revelation. The Legiones Astartes, sundered by lies. A civil war ignited between colossal armies of gene-forged fighters, which could only end in fires of conflict burning across the galaxy.

And this was only the beginning of it. Dorn's blunt, matter-of-fact message had carried not only word of disloyalty but also of death. The Salamanders, Raven Guard and Iron Hands had taken the brunt of the betrayal, their forces smashed. Mars was ablaze in factional warfare. The fates – and the fealty – of the White Scars, Ultramarines, Dark Angels, Thousand Sons and Space Wolves were unknown.

Sanguinius's voice revealed nothing but hard, fiery anger as he spoke of his brother Ferrus Manus, reportedly slain by Fulgrim himself, and of great Vulkan, also presumed dead. 'We have broken out of

this hellish oubliette, and found ourselves in a different universe from the one we left. Everything has changed.' He placed a hand over the ruby heart on his chest plate, marking a line of blood upon it. 'Even us.'

Each warrior knew what he meant. The red thirst had come upon them all, and staggered them with its power. Furio spoke the words they all felt. 'What took place here can never be allowed to happen again.'

'But it will,' said Sanguinius. 'And when that fury comes once more, know this. The Blood Angels will be ready. The flaw in us is not something that can be dismissed or defeated with ease. It is the inner enemy, the reflection of the conflict without!' The burning fury in his manner shifted, and Sanguinius walked among them, giving each warrior a nod or a touch of his hand upon their shoulder. 'Aye, it is part of what we are. Our gift and our curse. And we will master it, if we are to win this war, the war of brothers against brothers, for the Imperium and the future.'

'*For the Imperium!*' The call left Raldoron's lips, and his battle-brothers carried it high, drawing their swords and raising them in salute.

The Angel gave a nod. 'We take our leave of this place, my sons. Turn from it and guide your eyes to the battles ahead. With these steps, our Legion embarks upon its greatest challenge.'

They filed back to their ships, and none of them glanced over their shoulders to see what they left behind. A glitter of gold and red by his boot caught Raldoron's eye and he stooped, plucking an ornate honour-sigil in the shape of a teardrop from the sand. The decoration was fine with etched text; he recognised it as belonging to a legionary of Squad Vitronus, and he resolved to return it to its owner's side.

When he looked up, the Angel was there. 'Ral,' he began, 'when we reach the flagship, I want you to send word to my brother. Tell Dorn what we fought here, if you can find the words. Tell him that the Blood Angels are on their way to Terra with all possible speed.'

At his primarch's side, the Sanguinary Guard Commander, Azkaellon, offered a thought. 'That may be easier said than done, lord. The Navigators aboard the ships at the edge of the system are reporting a strange confusion in the void.'

'What do you mean?' said Raldoron. 'Something to do with that veil effect?'

Azkaellon shook his head. 'No, this is different.' He frowned. 'The Navigators spoke of… a "dislocation" of the Imperial Astronomican. The eternal light of the great beacon on Terra is not where it should be.'

Raldoron grimaced. 'More warp-spawned trickery?'

'Perhaps,' considered the primarch. 'We must be cautious. We'll put the fleet into a distributed pattern, and have the Navigators sound for the strongest psychic signal. After what we have encountered here, the Legion must be prepared for any eventuality.'

They approached one of the Stormbirds and the crew saluted as the Angel climbed aboard. Raldoron followed Azkaellon and Sanguinary Guards, the drop-ramp rising behind him.

He saw the primarch glance at his Guard Commander. 'The full casualty reports have yet to be brought to me… I am saddened to consider Captain Redknife's absence from our gathering. What fate befell his Wolves?'

Raldoron's report to Azkaellon about finding Stiel had been thorough and unflinching in its estimation of how the Rune Priest had perished; the captain waited for Azkaellon to cast a look in his

direction, but he never did. ‘They died with honour, my lord,’ replied the commander.

With a crash of engines, the Stormbirds lifted off from the desert and blasted upward at hypersonic speeds. They moved too fast for the cyclonic shockwave to reach them, but the First Captain caught a flash of brilliant white from the corner of his eye, reflected from a viewport.

He turned away.

The central atrium of the *Red Tear* had been a place of devotional artworks and battle trophies to laud the warship’s accolades, but after Signus, it had changed as much as the Legion. Many of the halls and corridors of the battle-barge had been sealed off after the damage the ship had suffered, compartments and chambers repurposed for more immediate needs. The changes to the atrium had come without order, though. It had been done through silent understanding.

At the foot of a great frieze showing the Angel and his golden guards, brothers began a makeshift memorial for the lost. Small items such as sigils or honour-chains, personal chalices, even broken blades, formed a tapestry across the far wall. Rolls of digital parchment were fixed to the marble, and upon them there were names written in dozens of different hands. This would be the way they would remember, until the ceremony of mourning could be formalised.

Sergeant Cassiel reached out and traced Meros’s name with his finger, his brow furrowing.

‘He is dead, then.’ A hollowness moved through the air around him and Cassiel knew it was the woman called Tillyan. She came to stand beside him, reading the parchment. The sergeant considered her; at first, when they departed for the strike mission against the cathedral, he had thought of Niobe as a liability. She would slow them down, reduce their reaction times and make the attack much more difficult. He had little regard for the common Imperial citizenry.

But she had surprised him with her fortitude. This woman, who was not even a soldier, had walked with them into a place filled with terrors undreamed of by even the most seasoned veterans. She had not faltered. Cassiel saw a cast in Niobe’s eyes that seemed familiar, the same gaze he had seen in himself, in his kinsmen. Eyes that had gazed upon a kind of hell.

He wasn’t certain if she was crying; the emotions of unenhanced humans were hard for him to gauge.

She did not know the full detail of the Apothecary’s sacrifice, nor his ultimate fate. If truth were told, neither did Cassiel. Beaten, Tillyan Niobe had lain insensate on the floor of the bone temple while Meros had given his life. *Or had he?* Cassiel knew death, and that was not what had claimed his brother.

‘He will live on,’ offered the sergeant. ‘His gene-seed was recovered from the field of battle. It will become the genesis of future generations of Blood Angels. Meros’s bravery will be remembered.’

‘Is that all that is left of him?’ Cassiel didn’t understand the question. ‘What of his spirit?’

‘I have no knowledge of such things,’ he replied, after a moment. Niobe clasped a small, leather-bound book in her hand. It was careworn and scuffed, and he had not seen it before. ‘What is that?’

She coloured slightly, clutching it tighter. ‘It belonged to Dortmund. I found it on his–’ Niobe swallowed. ‘I found it,’ she concluded.

Cassiel had seen the remains of the civilian survivors, butchered by the harriers and furies. They had died because their presence had been revealed by Niobe’s departure, and it had not been swift for them.

She opened the book and he saw pages of tiny red text in the local dialect of Gothic. ‘There is some comfort in it,’ she explained.

Cassiel was about to leave, but an odd impulse came to him. He glanced at the parchment once again, then to the book.

‘Read some of it to me,’ he said.

The drill hall was empty when Raldoron arrived, in hopes of finding the peace of meditation in the wide open chamber. Such tranquillity no longer came easily to him.

When the sound of a fist ringing against the adamantium supports broke his focus, he did not begrudge it. The First Captain rose from where he knelt and turned. Without waiting for his permission, a hooded figure pushed past him into the chamber.

‘Amit.’ No other warrior of the Legion would be so bold. The Captain of the Fifth pulled back his hood and fixed his brother with a brooding, surly gaze. ‘I thought you returned to the *Victus*,’ Raldoron went on.

‘For a time,’ Amit said wearily. He opened his robes and there in his hand was the naked length of his battle sword, the barbed flaying blade that had earned the captain the name ‘Flesh Tearer’. He offered it like a trophy. ‘Take this from me. I no longer deserve it, nor my rank and status. I have dishonoured our Legion. The Wolves…’ His words faded.

Raldoron’s blood ran cold as a missing piece fell into place in his thoughts. ‘It was you. Your legionaries. *You* were responsible for the deaths of Redknife’s squad.’

‘Take it!’ Amit shouted. ‘I must atone for what was done. I and my warriors have betrayed our Emperor. We murdered our allies! We lost control! The blood…’ His voice broke in a gasp of sorrow and anger. ‘It blinded me. I saw only enemies to be killed.’

How could you do this? Raldoron wanted to shout the question, but he knew the answer. He had felt the power of the ragefire, barely been able to resist it himself even with the pariah woman at close hand. Amit and his legionaries had been granted no such protection. The fury in them, so close to the surface already, had smothered their reason.

‘I will take responsibility for what has been done,’ said Amit. ‘I forfeit my life, my rank and my honour.’

‘You will do none of that.’ Azkaellon emerged from the shadows across the chamber, his armour shimmering in the light of the electro-candles. ‘It will not be permitted.’

‘Following me?’ Amit snapped.

‘You knew,’ said Raldoron, eyeing the Guard Commander. ‘When I confided to you about Jonor Stiel, you knew then.’

Azkaellon gave a curt nod. ‘The bodies of Redknife’s warriors were recovered by High Warden Berus. He understood the import of how they had met their end as well as I did. I took steps.’

Confusion crossed Amit’s features. ‘What does he mean?’

‘He kept the truth of your… error… from the Angel.’

Amit rounded on Azkaellon, brandishing his sword. ‘You had no right!’

The warrior in gold surged forward and snatched at the tip of the blade, gripping it in his fingers. ‘I have every right!’ he snarled. ‘I am Master of the Sanguinary Guard and it is my duty to protect the primarch in all things!’

‘You lied,’ spat Raldoron. ‘To Sanguinius himself!’

‘I only kept a single truth, for the sake of the master and the Legion.’ He pushed the blade away. ‘I did it to protect us!’ Azkaellon’s moment of temper ebbed and he became cool and controlled once more. ‘And you will do the same, my brothers.’

‘No,’ Amit shook his head fiercely.

‘Yes,’ insisted Azkaellon. ‘Or you will damn us to greater division and bloodshed.’ He studied them both. ‘If Sanguinius knew how Redknife’s Wolves had died, what would he do? In his noble purity, he would never conscience keeping that from Leman Russ. He would bear the blame himself, and what would be the result? A new schism between two Legions in a time when unity must be paramount. We are entering a civil war! Aye, the Space Wolves may never stand with the Warmaster’s rebellion, but still they must not be given cause to distrust the Blood Angels.’ He shot a cold look at Amit. ‘We cannot afford to assuage your guilt over actions committed while you were not in your right mind. Many horrors were unleashed upon us at Signus. Yours is only one, captain.’ He turned to Raldoron, a flash of regret in his eye. ‘You both know I am right.’

‘The point is well made,’ said Raldoron, the words ashes in his mouth. He hated the mendacity of it, but while callous, Azkaellon’s logic was sound.

‘You command me to silence,’ growled Amit. ‘But what will quiet the remorse in my hearts?’

‘The burden you must carry is a small price to pay,’ said Azkaellon.

Zuriel’s glaive encarmine whispered from its scabbard as Kano approached the sanctorum, the sword dropping across his path. ‘You are not summoned, brother,’ said the Sanguinary Guard sergeant. ‘This day he speaks to no one.’

Kano grimaced, much of it from the bite of his healing wounds, but more from a deeper pain not so easy to banish. ‘Perhaps the Angel will change his mind if he knows I have come to him.’

Zuriel’s face shifted, and there was guilt there. It had not been said aloud, but Kano knew that at the heights of the brutal frenzy that had overtaken the Blood Angels, even the Sanguinary Guard had succumbed. None could blame them, but the warriors in gold had left their posts at the primarch’s side to fall into the grip of the blood-thirst. Each of Azkaellon’s legionaries bore the shame of that dereliction of duty, and Kano wondered how they would pay for it.

Kano had been the only one who stayed; what Zuriel would think of him because of that, he could not guess at. For his part, Kano’s status was in flux. He had been party to the breaking of an Imperial edict, and while some spoke of reinstating the Librarius division, others called for the harshest censure.

All of the Blood Angels were weary, even if they hid it well. It had been days since the grand flotilla had left the Signus Cluster and lit for the core worlds. Entry into the warp had not been easy: ethereal hyperstorms awaited them in the extradimensional realm, fogging their course and battering at the Geller fields protecting their ships. There were suggestions that the warp itself had been agitated into frenzy by the incursions of the daemon creatures. Whatever the cause, it made hard going for the fleet elements. Then there was the matter of the Astronomican. The guiding beacon, the psychic lighthouse on Terra that stood as the single fixed point in the otherwise malleable landscape of warp space, had become indistinct. A spatial disturbance of magnitudes not recorded since the Age of Strife rippled in the void, robbing the Navigators of their certainty. Now the fleet struggled on through the screaming abyss, searching for the strongest psychic glimmer, in vain hopes of pushing through to the Throneworld.

The sergeant was about to shake his head and dismiss the adjutant more forcefully, but then a subtle indicator icon on the vambrace of Zuriel's armour blinked red. His manner immediately changed, and the glaive returned to its sheath. 'You may enter.'

Kano glanced around, wondering if Sanguinius had been monitoring the antechamber through some hidden scrying device.

Inside, the Angel's chamber of solace showed some signs of damage and minor disarray, but it seemed insignificant. The primarch was in the centre of the room, seated upon a curule chair of gunmetal and red velvet. He was without any iteration of his great armour; along the far walls there were hemispheric capsules with crystalflex panels, revealing his battle plate contained within. Yet without the gold the Angel did not seem diminished. Rather, it was as if he had been released. His wings nestled above his back, Sanguinius wore ordinary robes of a cut that was identical to those of a first-ranked neophyte. They bore no marks of status beyond the Legion sigil and a thick black mourning band that circled the sleeve about his bicep.

A tall, spindly servitor hunched over the primarch, a spider of delicate plasteel fingers tracing across his face. Kano smelled ink and blood.

'Come,' said the Angel, without turning. He raised a hand and beckoned Kano closer. 'What ails you, my son?'

As he opened his mouth to speak, Kano felt a weight descend upon his shoulders. 'Master. I am deeply troubled. Each time I close my eyes, I see again what ranges out before us. Futures. Possibilities.' His throat was arid and he swallowed. 'Death.'

'Those things were not meant for you,' said the Angel. 'I am sorry you had to witness them.'

Kano came to stand at attention in front of the primarch, pausing to give a low bow. There, he could see that the servitor was at work at Sanguinius's cheek, moving tiny probes over the surface of his skin. Dots of bright laser light flashed at the mechanical fingertips. He looked away. 'Those visions. Those *events*. Is that what you see, my lord? In your dreams, the deaths of empire and Emperor? Of eternal war?'

It was a long moment before the Angel answered. 'I dream of many things, Kano. I dreamed of you, years before you became known to me. Meros. I saw him too. I saw you both in your acts of valour, saving my life. Saving our Legion. But only now do I realise the meaning I had glimpsed in those brief moments.' He grasped a corner of his robe and held it up, running his fingers over the surface of the cloth. 'This is time, my son. A fabric of possibilities, crossing and re-crossing one another. But it is the weave that makes the shape of it, not the threads. What may appear to be a seam of importance leads nowhere. And what is dismissed…' He trailed off. 'I can no more predict our tomorrows than I can command the motion of the stars.' For an instant, Sanguinius's gaze turned inwards, remembering something long past. 'As much is unseen to me as is seen. Know that, Kano. What you shared with me is only the skein of the potential, and even in the act of observing it, you altered its path. We will know the future when it is upon us, and not before.'

Despite himself, Kano gave a rueful smile. 'That is little comfort, my lord.'

'I know,' said Sanguinius. 'Believe me, I know. You will find a kind of peace eventually, but when you came into the mindscape, you burned something of yourself to reach me. You will never have it back, just as Ecanus and the other Librarians will never live again but in our memories.' He reached for a red grail at his side and raised it in salute. 'I continue to be honoured by my Legion's dedication. You have my gratitude.' As the Angel took a sip, the servitor released a sigh and retreated, the spindly

lengths of its arms folding back into its chest.

There, upon Sanguinius's face, a single black teardrop had been permanently tattooed into his cheek. The ebon mark marred the flawless form of his features, but he wore it proudly. 'So none will forget,' he explained, and offered the grail to Kano.

He took it, surprised by the gesture. It held a fine, rich red wine, and the taste of it reminded him of Baal. The flavour kindled a moment of memory; another rich taste upon his lips, another thirst for something else.

The primarch watched him, and gave a nod. 'The curse is revealed. I had hoped it would never be so, and in my hubris, I tried to hide it. Horus used that against me. So many trusts he broke. Now every Blood Angel knows the burn of the red thirst, the shadow on their spirit… and the worst of it is, a greater darkness lies beneath that impulse. I will do everything in my power to hold that future at bay.'

Sanguinius rose and walked to the tall windows across the sanctum. There was the slightest stiffness in his gait, the only outward sign of the near-crippling injuries he had suffered on Signus Prime.

Glimpsed behind heavy curtains of crimson, beyond the armoured portal, the wild colours and non-space of the immaterium surged and churned. The Angel pushed a curtain aside to stare into the face of the warp.

'But there are futures I am sure of,' offered the primarch. 'The creature Ka'Bandha who struck me down… We will have a reckoning. And there will come a greater battle beyond that, with the Warmaster himself.' Bitterness filled his words. 'I made a vow, Kano. I will see it to its bloody ending.' The Angel turned away from the window and incarnadine light haloed his folded wings. 'There may be a day, and sooner than we might wish, when you… when my sons will have to go on without me.'

Kano found himself shaking his head. 'No, my lord. You are eternal–'

'No being is eternal,' came the reply, 'not even my father.' Slowly, a proud smile crossed the primarch's lips. 'You and Ecanus and your fellows… Meros… every single one of you proved that the Blood Angels have the strength and the nobility to face any challenge. No matter how terrible. You did all this without me at your side.'

The red grail fell from Kano's nerveless fingers, thudding to the deck as he realised what he was hearing.

Sanguinius's gaze was strong and steady. 'Swear this to me, Brother Kano. You will speak to no one of what we shared in those visions.'

It seemed like an eternity before he could answer. 'On my oath. I swear it.'

The words had barely left his lips before the *Red Tear*'s deck lurched beneath his boots and the nightmare vista of warp space flashed brilliant white.

Kano felt the sickly rush in the pit of his thoughts that always came with a translation from the immaterium. He looked up and through the portal saw unfamiliar stars patterned across the blackness of space, and what might have been starships.

The Angel turned, and his eyes hardened. 'This isn't right.'

Kano whirled as the chamber doors crashed open and Zuriel entered at a run, his brothers Mendrion and Halkryn a few steps behind. Belatedly, alert tocsins began to sound.

'Master?' said Zuriel.

Sanguinius waved him away and strode to a hololithic display in the centre of the chamber. 'Command,' he snapped, 'priority.'

Immediately an image swam into definition, and Kano made out a three-dimensional representation of part of the *Red Tear*'s bridge. A figure hove into view: Captain Carminus of the Third Company, the officer chosen by the primarch to take the temporary office of Fleet Master after Admiral DuCade's suicide.

Carminus saluted and did not wait to be asked the obvious question. 'The Navigators, my lord. They fell into some kind of fugue state a few moments ago. We tried to awaken them, but they would only speak of "a safe harbour". Then suddenly they executed a warp translation here.'

Halkryn was at the great windows. 'This is not the Sol system. The stars are all wrong.' He pointed up and to starboard, where a thick belt of light – the curve of a galactic spiral arm – was clearly visible.

'Initial estimates show we are still within the Ultima Segmentum,' said Carminus. 'The cogitators are running exact constellation matches now, but it appears we have been *displaced*.'

'Hundreds of light-years off course,' said the primarch. 'We must assume the worst. Send word to all ships, all squadrons. Take us to battle stations, Sacrus. Anything that does not fly our colours is to be considered dangerous.' Carminus saluted and turned from the visual pickup to relay the command.

'How did we come to be here?' said Kano, struggling to process it. 'We should be at the gates of Terra.'

'Warp travel has never been an exact science,' muttered Zuriel. 'But if our Navigators were somehow corrupted by the enemy without our knowledge… They may have delivered us to the traitors.'

Sanguinius shook his head. 'No. This is something different, I can feel it. The storms, the fading of the signal from the Astronomican. It's all connected.' He fell silent, musing. 'I told the Navigators to strike for the strongest telepathic signal.' The Angel glanced at Kano. 'What if that was *not* my father's beacon on Terra?'

'How can any light be greater than the Emperor's?' insisted Mendrion.

The primarch was grim-faced. 'I do not know.'

Carminus reappeared in the hololith. 'Lord Primarch. Fleet pickets are reporting the approach of a skirmish line of unidentified starships.' He read the data off a slate in his hand. 'Imperial silhouettes. Heavy cruisers. Frigates. Destroyers. They are running with void shields raised and gun ports open.'

'A blockade force patrolling the approaches,' offered Zuriel.

Halkryn raised his arm and pointed. 'I think I see them. Port quarter high.'

'Prepare to fire,' ordered the Angel. 'Warning shots first. If they do not stand down, order gunners to target for motion kills.' He turned from the hololith and went to the portal, Kano trailing behind him.

The interception force approached at high velocity, the dots of light swiftly gaining definition. Even from such a great distance, Kano's enhanced eyesight brought him the shape of the vessels. He saw the distinctive plough-like bow blade common to Imperial warships, and noted that many of the craft had the patched, rough-edged look of veterans. This was no flight of hangar queens, but battle-hardened craft not long off the front lines.

At the leading edge of the group, the hulls were the common silver-grey of the Imperial Army's naval battalions, but the larger ships had a different livery. A bright cobalt-blue the shade of an

evening sky, trimmed with flawless white and shining gold.

At his shoulder, Zuriel saw the same. ‘Can it be?’

‘My lord!’ Carminus called from the hololith relay. ‘We are receiving a signal…’ The captain hesitated, uncertain of what he was about to say. ‘I believe it is for your attention.’

The flickering hologram broke apart into a wash of shimmering static, changing and reforming. It became a powerful figure, a new face, a strong and stern visage of aquiline proportions. A towering warrior whose presence – even diminished by distance and the attenuation of the projection – was still a match for that of the Angel.

‘Roboute…?’ Kano heard the surprise in his primarch’s voice. ‘Brother.’

The master of the XIII Legion smiled, gratitude in his gaze. ‘Well met, Sanguinius. I welcome you to Ultramar and the Five Hundred Worlds.’ He nodded to himself, as if acknowledging a truth now revealed. ‘It is good that you are here. Now we can begin.’

EPILOGUE

Warmaster Horus looked up from his throne and his assembled court as Erebus entered the chamber. The Dark Apostle broke protocol and strode forwards without waiting for acknowledgement, barely even offering a dip of his head as some kind of salute. Annoyance danced in his dark eyes, uncharacteristically clear for once.

'Warmaster,' he said, a sneer buried in the words, 'I bring you a *gift* from Signus Prime.'

A cluster of Word Bearers followed the Chaplain into the hall, each of them holding on to a chain that extended away to a figure floating off the deck. The figure was a warrior in broken crimson armour, wreathed in a fiery red-orange glow that reeked of anger.

Horus's Mournival were already stepping forwards, his trusted lieutenants with their hands on bolters and blades, the issue taken with Erebus's disrespect open for their punishment. The Warmaster gestured with a talon of the huge power claw on his right hand, stopping them before they could act. Instead, he rose and stepped down from the dais.

Ignoring Erebus, he crossed to the tormented warrior. Horus brushed aside the Word Bearers holding the chains, and they gingerly stepped back, releasing their charge. The daemon-touched legionary did not react, his inner glow seething.

The Warmaster felt hatred radiating from the possessed body, and he turned his face to it, basking in the burn. Horus knew rage well, and he saw it contained here. The tortured, cracked armour of the warrior that had once been a son of Sanguinius wavered like a mirage. He studied the figure for anything that showed name or rank, but found only the remains of company and squad markings, and the molten ruin of an Apothecary's prime helix badge.

'Who are you?' he asked.

Infernal eyes regarded him. 'Who I was no longer matters, Warmaster. I am a weapon at your command.'

Horus smiled coldly. 'I approve of that.'

'The hate of a hundred thousand souls fills me. I burn eternally with it. I am bound to the ruin of all things.' The spectral voice echoed. 'I am the Fallen Son of Baal, the *Cruor Angelus*, the Willing Slave. I am the Red Angel.'

'It takes Angron's title in vain?' Maloghurst, the Warmaster's equerry, dared to offer an opinion. 'The gladiator will see grave offence in that.'

The daemon-bound did not look away from Horus. 'If the primarch Angron wishes that name then he may challenge me for it. I deserve it more than he ever will.'

A mixture of gruff amusement and irritation at this presumption moved through the assemblage in the court, and Horus let it die away, circling the possessed figure. Finally, he nodded to himself. 'You will be of use.' He turned to walk back to his throne.

'*Of use?*' Erebus repeated, and his tone halted the Warmaster in mid-step. 'This freak collision of effect is plucked from the rubble of a failed endeavour, and that is all you have to say on the matter?'

'You take issue with this?' Horus's voice was deceptively calm.

It was the manner of Erebus to be metered and calculating in all things; or at least, it *had* been that at the beginning. But recently, the reticence that shadowed his easy cunning had waned, and there a growth of arrogance was becoming clear.

‘The trap at Signus has failed!’ The Dark Apostle bit out the words. ‘The Blood Angels should be at our banner.’ He jabbed a finger at the floor. ‘Sanguinius should be kneeling before you, bathed in blood and broken. Instead, this *remnant* is all we have to show for our effort!’ Erebus frowned. ‘So much had been put into the construction of the cults and the blood fanes. We needed that Legion. We would *have* that Legion, if you had not intervened.’

Horus showed no sign of irritation at the veiled accusation. ‘You think I was wrong?’ He opened his hands. ‘Please, speak plainly Erebus. I would have it no other way.’

That Erebus took the next step was the clearest indication of how much he had changed since Davin. ‘You broke the pattern. You disrupted the flow by offering skulls to the Bloodthirster, all because you did not wish the Angel to stand among us! You did not want a rival in our ranks! The Blood Angels walk the scarlet path, but now they will never be ours. The Ruinous Powers will not be pleased.’

The Apostle’s brief tirade died away into silence, and no other sound rose beyond it. There came a flash of shock, quickly smothered, as too late Erebus arrived at the understanding that he had overstepped the mark.

Horus studied him, examining the dense lines of text tattooed across the Word Bearer’s face and neck. ‘I admit I am displeased at this turn of events. Sanguinius’s death would have served many purposes, even if my vanity was one of them.’ He grinned, at once malicious and self-deprecating. Then his manner turned cold. ‘But so be it. The Angel will face me in battle before our campaign ends. Only one of us will survive.’

‘That could have been avoided,’ Erebus offered, attempting to make back the ground he had given up.

‘Do you think I am a puppet?’ said Horus. He nodded at the Red Angel. ‘A weapon to be commanded? I think you may. I think you must be reminded of your place in the scheme of things.’

The Warmaster’s hand shot out and snatched at the hilt of a dagger sheathed at the Dark Apostle’s belt. Erebus gave a gasp as Horus took his athame and turned it in his grip, letting the warp-touched blade catch the chamber’s ill light.

‘You let the mask slip, Erebus,’ he told him. ‘You showed yourself to me. I saw what you show *them*.’ Horus touched the tip of the dagger on the Apostle’s cheek and he flinched away as it burned him. The Sons of Horus were suddenly there at his back, blocking his retreat.

For a moment, the Word Bearers legionaries in the chamber hesitated, hands falling to their weapons, ready to defend their master, but Erebus slowly shook his head, warning them off. He had to realise what was to come, and that he had no choice but to accept it.

‘Let me see that face again,’ said Horus, cutting a bloody line across Erebus’s forehead, as his warriors took the Apostle’s arms and held him rigid. ‘Your true face.’

With an artist’s care, the Warmaster sliced through flesh and into meat. Though he gasped and trembled, Erebus did not cry out. Horus took the severed edge between his fingers, and like the turning of a page, he skinned Erebus’s face from his blood-smothered head.

The Word Bearer staggered back, his features a ruin of crimson, stark white eyes glaring out and unable to blink.

‘The things that whisper in your ear, that you hold in concord with your pacts and your inscriptions… Remind them that they are not the architects of this war.’ Horus paused as he considered the bloody rag that was his new trophy.

‘*I am.*’

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